

# THE CHORUS

A TALE OF LOVE AND FOLLY

SYLVIA LYND

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## THE CHORUS



THE CHORUS  
A TALE OF LOVE AND  
FOLLY. BY SYLVIA LYND

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To  
THE GENEROUS HANDS OF  
N. F. DRYHURST



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# THE CHORUS

## CHAPTER I

A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE, A BEAUTIFUL LADY, A VERY  
YOUNG LADY, THE HERO AND ANOTHER

IT was one of the beauty's good days. Seated at the inlaid bureau in the hall, she was writing letters. In her hand was a quill pen stained emerald green, and so large that it seemed as if a puff of wind would put "way" on it and send it out of control altogether. In her sprawling writing she was covering some thin sheets of grey note-paper with green ink. Vague little notes: "Do come down one Friday night and stay the week-end. The house is going to be nice, I think"; or "Mrs. Hamel will be obliged if Messrs. Frülige will send some patterns of brocades and silks for evening gowns"; and so on. She felt very busy and efficient.

The room was quiet, save for the squeaking of the pen and an occasional sound, not unlike a hiccup, from the tall clock that swung its pendulum against the wall. At her right a wood fire was blazing; at her left long, square-paned glass doors revealed the garden, as yet a wilderness of black earth, and the woods of the Warren pencilling the

sky half a mile away. Somewhere a man was levelling one of the lawns, making a heavy dunting sound as he pounded.

The hall was warm and sweet with the scent of hyacinths that filled with a white foam a lustre bowl on the round table. The great staircase, lazily slanted, sloped away into upper regions of luxury and peace. The fire streamed up the chimney, a grey Persian cat stretched itself on the hearthrug. It was the leisure hour between lunch and the exertions of tea. Over all was the cold white light of a March afternoon.

Mrs. Hamel was a slender, fair-haired woman whose calm no wave of thought or feeling had ever disturbed. She was like one of those frail shells that survive the fiercest storms—"ladies' fingernails" children call them. She had only two interests in life, and was not aware of having any: her health and her clothes. Her days were partitioned between not feeling very well and staying in bed and feeling well enough to put on a new gown and come downstairs.

Anthony Hamel had added her to his other possessions much as he had acquired his carpets and his furniture, because she was perfect in her way; but she always felt a stranger in her own house. It was no home of hers. She was merely another jewel that Anthony had chosen to set, and she had the good sense to let him choose her setting. Her own taste in visual things was entirely non-existent. She might have been born blind so little did shape and colour mean anything to her. She liked a couch to be soft and did not care what it was covered with; she liked her gowns to fit—that was,

to be a little tight round the ribs and waist—and was as content in navy blue piped with crimson (a favourite scheme of hers before she married), provided it cost much money, as in the delicate garments Anthony chose for her. However, she trusted his taste. She liked to possess what would probably be the finest house in England even if she did not feel entirely comfortable in it. She enjoyed the position of importance that his genius had made for her. But in sympathy she belonged to the little crowd of Army men and parsons from which she had sprung: men so content to be the sons of other men as not to need to distinguish themselves in their professions. People with an exaggerated respect for the trimness and order, the to-morrow the same as yesterday, of their not important lives. She viewed with a fine disdain her husband's patrons and associates—artists and men of letters—as a horde of ragamuffins and mountebanks. She believed that she had come down in the world, and though she was too well bred actually to boast of her former altitude, she never ceased to condescend to emotion and intelligence as to ignoble things. Withal she was scrupulously faithful in the smallest details of her life, chaste, courageous. She was a diamond, or, better, a clear frosty morning, contrasting with her countrywomen, who too often are the Sou'wester overwhelming in jollity, or due East. She had no kinship with April weather.

The clock against the wall cleared its throat and struck softly.

A few minutes later the door leading to the garden was opened and a tall girl in a coat and skirt stepped into the room.

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"Mr. Hamel sent me to say he may be late for tea. He's just firing something."

"I hope you've had a good day?"

"Splendid. May I wait to hear how the furnace behaves? They don't need me any more out there." She nodded up the garden.

"Yes, do. Just ring for tea, will you? I'm much too hungry to wait for them."

The tall girl, having rung the bell, settled herself in an arm-chair on the other side of the fire and stretched her feet in their neat brown shoes to the blaze. She sat with the seemingly deliberate ungracefulness of a young man, her elbows on the arms of the chair, her hands, with fingers locking, resting on her breast, her head, its brown hair ruffled from the wind, poked forward. It was quite a surprise to realize how pretty her face was. Her name was Hilda Concannon.

She watched Mrs. Hamel crowd her signature on to the last scrawled sheet of note-paper, then she said—

"May I bring my friend Nelly Hayes to see you when she comes down? She's coming to stay with me at the end of the week."

"Yes, do. Young girls are so amusing. Is she as quite modern as you are?"

"Oh no, she's quite ancient. She hasn't any theories. Not a bit like me. There must have been scores of Nelly Hayeses since the beginning of the world. Only most of them get varnished out of recognition. She's the old Eve."

"Well, I'm glad there are *some* natural girls left," said Mrs. Hamel.

Hilda smiled cheerfully.

"You'd better bring her in to dinner"—Mrs. Hamel corrected herself—"in *after* dinner on Saturday night. There will be rather a big party of us."

"Thanks ever so much. I shall love to."

Hilda Concannon was the daughter of a mill-owner. Her father had retired early from business with a weak heart and a small fortune. From that time he had had no place in which to exercise his powers of order and domination but a double-fronted villa in Ballygrawna. There, with the help of a threatened fit of apoplexy, he was a despot indeed. Hilda, a brother who drank, and her shadowy, low-spirited mother, together with a band of much-cursed maidservants and grooms, constituted his state. For years Hilda had grown accustomed to tip-toeing through life in constant expectation of uproar. Mr. Concannon trod his house in a permanent simmering anger. Until Hilda did so herself no one had ever dreamt of combating him, let alone of trying to conquer him. Hilda it was who taught him his first lesson.

She had been educated at an expensive English boarding-school, followed by a year in a Belgian convent to which, with one of those curious lapses of logic which distinguish the North of Ireland Protestant, she had been sent to learn to speak French. She was picking up what Art knowledge she could from books and the local Art school, reading for her degree at Queen's College, and feeling all the while that intense arrogance and self-confidence which is the happy lot of people aged eighteen, when the great moment came. Mr. Concannon, incited by the eloquence of a clergy-

man at lunch on the modern girl, her uselessness, idleness and extravagance, pursued Hilda into the garden, whither she had at the earliest moment fled out of reach of the eloquence, and there publicly and idiotically commanded her to "weed the rockery bed."

"Don't be silly, Father," said Hilda, summoning a bored voice. "You know the gardener does it."

"Is that any reason why you should eat the bread of idleness?" asked Mr. Concannon. (A large meal of meat and wines always made an explosion of temper necessary.) "Remember your father's health, dear," sounded vainly in Hilda's ears. She was a Concannon and the blood of her father flowed strongly in her veins.

"And the sooner you have your apoplectic fit, the better," she had ended.

It was a famous victory. From that day her father regarded her with a kind of surly admiration. He settled a little income upon her, and though in a subsequent rage he tried to disendow her, his first enthusiasm proved to have been too strong, and his solicitor told him, not without malicious enjoyment, that it was impossible to take the money back again.

This unlooked-for good fortune made Hilda thirsty for freedom. She abandoned her intention of taking a degree, and announced that she was going to Paris to learn to paint. This statement was provocative of such domestic anguish, however, that in the end she compromised and went to London instead. There her first bad disappointment awaited her. She found that she should never paint well enough to be in the front rank of her

art. She was too ambitious to be content with pottering and too honest to disguise a failure from herself. She believed she could use her gifts of colour and design in metalwork and enamelling, and after a preliminary trial in Regent Street, where she learnt to handle her tools, Anthony Hamel's name, naturally, was suggested to her. So to Anthony Hamel she apprenticed herself. He approved her work; approved, too, her keen, insolent young face; and now for half a year she had lived at Elkins's Farm, in Otterbridge, at the foot of the hill where the Hamels' great house was nearing completion.

It was to be named The Height, appropriate to its position and to its owner's success in the world. It crowned the next hill to the Warren, and was set on a green space between beech woods and the pines. It was built of pale stone, roofed with silver slate; but the greyness was enlivened by the brilliant limewashing of the upper storey and between it and the stone a band of terra-cotta brick. The red appeared again in the chimney-pots, the white in the stacks, and the whole was long and rather low, varied, self-conscious and delightful.

The garden was to be terraced to the main road. The chief entrance was at the back, as it were, reached by a steep drive circling the hill. Towards the Warren stretched a rose-garden of pergola'd walks and an orchard. At the far end a smaller white-walled building was the studio. With the long line of its stables and outhouses standing at a lower level it had the air of a hill-town, a little citadel held against commonness, and particularly against the Jabberwock Halls of the golf links from

which it differed much as does a Brabazon water-colour from a Christmas-number oleograph.

Mrs. Hamel sealed the last of her envelopes and moved from the bureau to the sofa.

"Do make the tea, Hilda," she said. "I am quite exhausted."

She arranged the folds of her soft gown and with an effort lifted her small feet on to the couch beside her. Thus composed she ate a hearty meal.

The curtains were drawn, the kettle was singing, the lamplight was a benediction. The big silver teapot and the frail painted cups showed each an answering speck of flame.

Hilda, busy with the tea-caddy, talked of Nelly Hayes.

"She's an Irish girl, too, and that made us friendly at once. You know, English people are not exactly welcoming at first—not the English people in a boarding-house. There was one old lady with a *toupee* that used to make my blood run cold. It was as much as my iron self-control could do not to believe that she would come upstairs and cut my throat while I was asleep. Have you read the 'Bagman's Dog'?"

"And who is she?"

"Oh, Nelly? I haven't a notion. She told me 'Hayes' is not her real name. She's entrancingly pretty."

She saw in her mind's eye Nelly seated on her bed in the dun-coloured Bloomsbury boarding-house—Nelly, wrapped picturesquely in a grimy silk kimono, recounting a family history of the most improbable description.

"And so, you see, it's very important that no one

should find out where my mother is, for fear father would know and get a hold of Jimmy."

"But, my dearest Nelly, your father couldn't possibly take your brother away. If he's such a ruffian as that nobody would allow it. Your mother could divorce him six times over."

"She could and she couldn't," came the trailing voice. "There's more in it than that. My mother, do you see, has a man she's fond of (there's nothing in it but that), and he's fond of her, too, but she hasn't much money, and so she lets Joey Harrison pay the bills. He's my guardian and he's tremendously rich. When I'm older I'm going to marry him. We have it all arranged. So, you see, it's very important that father shouldn't know about it——" And so on.

"Father" appeared to be a gentleman with dyed moustaches (Nelly displayed his "photo"), whose only known exploits in the last twelve years were the begetting of Jimmy and the "putting away" of Nelly's pearl pendant.

"But I know I can always raise five pounds on it now, and that's one good thing," added his daughter, with stoicism.

Unfortunately five pounds would be of little use in the present emergency. They owed the boarding-house keeper sixteen. It was Nelly herself that was in pawn until she received a remittance.

"And then I shall go on a frightful racket and buy a whole lot of new clothes."

"But, my child, how hateful for you! Don't you mind being left behind like this?"

Nelly shrugged her shoulders. "I'm used to it," she said.

Hilda believed very few of the stories that had for their origin that fluent, indolent brain.

She told Mrs. Hamel—

“Father Hayes, so far as I can make out, is a pretty complete villain; ‘a bad egg’ Nelly calls him. Her mother seems to have come down in the world; I’ve never seen her.”

“Probably a case of a runaway match with a groom,” said Mrs. Hamel, faintly interested. “I’ve often wondered what became of them.”

“The ‘bad end’ in this case would give the gloomiest prophets satisfaction, I should think;” said Hilda. “I don’t understand much about it, but it’s very pitiable. I gather there’s a small brother for whom they sacrifice everything. Nelly was marooned in a boarding-house when I met her.”

She did not mention, and indeed never reminded herself, who it was bailed Nelly out of that particular prison.

Mrs. Hamel was already regretting having invited the girl. She was probably an impossible creature.

“Dear Hilda, how very impetuous you are!”

Hilda guessed her thought, and said—

“But, whatever sort of people she has, they haven’t affected her in the least. She has sweet manners and the best spirits in the world. You feel the sun comes out when you look at her. I’m going to make a thousand drawings of her while she’s here.”

“And how old is this engaging young person?”

“Oh, sixteen or seventeen, I suppose. I’ve never asked her. She looks less.”

Men's voices sounded outside, and Anthony Hamel and his lieutenant, Pandolefsky, a young man with no bridge to his nose and a scarlet shirt, came in from the garden. Pandolefsky was Hamel's right-hand man. He had a wonderful technical skill, and if he had had an original brain as well, Anthony would have been driven out of the field—so much they both admitted. Pandolefsky was anything but an attractive being, combining an adherence to the farmyard theory of life with a distaste for the contents of his water-jug. He had a strong belief that all women were of easily conquerable virtue, provided that the right man assailed them, and added to this faith, as is usually the case, another, namely, that he himself was the right man. It was one of Mrs. Hamel's by-laws that any maid-servant found speaking to Mr. Pandolefsky disappeared at once without wages, notice, or character. As a result, his progress about the house was marked with a whirring of petticoats and hidden gigglings, which helped to make strong his beliefs. Mrs. Hamel protected herself from the necessity of having him dismissed with her air of wanness and ill-health. Hilda's coming had at the beginning filled both the Hamels with anxiety, for nothing is more destructive of good work than an atmosphere of flirtation, unless, indeed, it is an atmosphere of spite; and between Pandolefsky and a good-looking girl these were the alternatives. Hilda, however, had, Ulster fashion, taken his measure with disconcerting swiftness, and when he told her, *tête-à-tête* in the studio one day, that *Art* was *Passion* and that we must *feel* in order to *express*, she did not disengage her sleeve from his

hot hand, but indicated gravely that what she wished to express was something austere and simple, that in herself she was cultivating, albeit hardily and with regret, the solitary and austere life. Hamel found her after this interview shaking with laughter, the cause of which the utmost persuasion could not make her reveal. The relations of the trio in the studio, however, could not have been more business-like and friendly.

"Well, darling," said Anthony, kissing his wife's hand, "how have you been? Isn't she looking lovely?" His musical voice had a pleasant little roughness, a grain in it. He seated himself for a moment on the back of the sofa, glorious with his red-brown hair and white jersey.

"How did the furnace behave?" asked Hilda. She was one of those young women in whom a display of marital affection always aroused a slight feeling of sickness.

"How did the furnace behave, O Handmaiden of Art? If I say the whole thing fused you will burst into tears."

They had been engaged upon a triptych of enamels for the music-room, and this was the final firing.

Pandolefsky in a strong Cockney accent said, "Your peacocks have turned out fine, Miss Con-cannon."

"Hilda is becoming such a dab at it that she'll be teaching us soon. She'll be able to strike-break next time you turn rusty, Pandolefsky."

"Oh, I wouldn't be a blackleg even for you, Mr. Hamel," said Hilda.

So they drank tea together. Mrs. Hamel aloof

but kindly, Anthony exuberant and sure of himself, Hilda cheerful and argumentative, Pandolefsky with a superior smile on his dark red lips for their contented ignorance of that intenser life of which he was so indefatigable an explorer.

## CHAPTER II

### SMALL TALK—NINETEEN DASH

MRS. HAMEL had collected quite a big party for the week-end.

Ernst Eckstein was there and his wife, who in the considered gaiety of her gowns was as decorative in a room as a cabinet of old china. They were both rich and young and handsome, and belonged to that esoteric portion of humanity which has known no stronger agitation than a new opera or theory of painting. They were not lightly lifted to clouds of enthusiasm, these young people, but it was extremely easy to set their teeth on edge.

Miss Fitch, the novelist, was at The Height too; a slim, witty woman, her dark hair touched with grey. She had a sharp tongue and a sharper eye, but she was not too sincere to be a pleasant companion.

There was a brown-bearded man called Fyvie, who was practising some of Hamel's ideas with a village industry in the North of England, and teaching his country people to weave thick carpets and rich silks that were unfortunately too expensive for anybody to buy.

And there were the Ardens, a charming couple, though Alicia had a tiresome tendency to think that all the world wanted was nice husbands enough to go round.

Ardent Keath, the well-known *litterateur*, was there, a successful young man, with hair smoothed back and jaded moustache. He had published, at his own expense, two books of poems, and wrote sombre letters to the sixpenny papers in defence of this or that artistic monstrosity.

The Hanburys came, also, man and wife both enormously rich. They were the patrons, in the more odious sense of the word, of beauty, and, with enjoyment, of poverty. Even in this well-endowed gathering money was still their distinctive quality.

Lastly, there was Steven Young—"Stevie," as his friends called him; not yet rich or successful or well-known—perhaps never going to be, comely, untried. He had a profound admiration for Hamel, an admiration unstimulated by the great man's success. It was said of him by Miss Fitch—and she was the sort of woman who knew—that he was a perfect darling, but that no one would dream of falling in love with him. Also that he was nice, but would never be any nicer. He was a writer of poems and lampoons, and in the intervals of his labours, which were not as yet many, he was one of the most serious young men that it would be possible to meet. His friends, indeed, thought he must have a weak heart, and decided that his smile—not too rare a thing—was pathetic. It gave him a sharp stab of anger whenever he looked at the Hanburys to think that people of their kind should be the employers of a man like Hamel.

Anthony was reconstructing their house at Apsley Place for them: "Such a pity he cannot reconstruct the owners at the same time," as Miss Fitch was reported to have said. There was always a

"Hanbury" or two at the Hamels' week-end parties "to keep us in touch with reality"—for Anthony used his house as a sort of hoarding and laboratory, trying experiments there and advertising effects. Every few months one or other of his rooms would become permanent in some ecstatic stranger's house, and an army of workmen would invade his own. He had no fixed allegiance. His brain teemed with fancies. He was always eager to invent wonderful trifles for his palaces and wonderful palaces for his trifles. He knew how much the thought makes for discontent that "nothing can be better than this."

"But surely," Hilda had said, "one thing must be the best?"

"Yes, but I like to think I haven't found it yet."

He was a creative artist to the depths of his being. The senses and what they meant to him were his happiness, how to express and enrich and intensify them a thousandfold his preoccupation. In metal work, enamel and sparkling stones he had first seemed able to recapture the solidity and vividness of Nature. His abundant energy, however, was not so soon exhausted. It became necessary to elaborate the smallest details of his life. He designed his house and a hundred prettinesses for it, his garden, his wife's clothes. He was never tired and never idle. His strong craftsman's hands were always busy, his inventive brain brimming with ideas. He could carry out any piece of work, from mounting a play to designing a racing-cup. He might be found at one time carving the plaster of a ceiling with his workmen, at another bottling wine in his cellar. He had never been in need of

money or forced to modify his ideas, and, as a result, success attended him. He had a factory in the East End of London—most spacious and convenient of factories—run by the invaluable Prestow, where much of his work was carried out. This he frequently visited. Much of his time, too, was spent at the sites where he was to build, surrounded by abject surveyors, or in the old houses whose dry bones he was to make live again. It was said of him that he did not scruple to use another man's idea, if it suited him; but it was admitted, also, that the man whose idea he acknowledged was on the road to prosperity. For his own enjoyment he worked in his studio whenever he could, painting strange panels and altar-pieces, and modelling in precious metals gauds for women to wear. Occasionally he held a little exhibition of these.

Mrs. Hanbury, seated next to him at dinner, was loud and eloquent in praise of his salt-cellars. She was promised them for Apsley Deane. Unaware of his custom, she was overwhelmed with her good fortune.

"But will you ever be able to make anything so lovely again?"

"My dear lady, if I thought I couldn't I should go straight to my room and blow out my brains." (Twenty minutes with Mrs. Hanbury usually turned a man's mind to graveyard thoughts.)

All the same, they were a merry party at the long dinner-table. The talk journeyed among books, pictures and politicians, and the more aggressive happenings in the world. They discussed the war scare, and Mrs. Arden declared that she always pictured herself at the siege of London. "On the

balcony, in my best gown, defying a glorious Hussar in a pale blue coat."

Fyvie, the man with the beard, was maintaining that military training was a capital thing for boys; "makes them grow up straight and muscular, and with some sense of discipline." Steven Young disagreed with him, saying that self-control was the antithesis of discipline, and the last thing taught in an army. Miss Fitch mocked some military acquaintance and described him as "sharpening his moustaches." Mrs. Hamel then quenched the conversation by saying she thought it "rather a fine thing for a man to fight for his country."

They talked then about feminism and whether women were really on the side of peace, and Fyvie boldly stated his enthusiasm for the modern muscular young woman. "Plenty of calisthenics," was his old-fashioned phrase. Mrs. Hamel told him he must meet Hilda Concannon, a typical modern girl. "I like her, but I don't pretend to understand her," she said, with rather a contemptuous voice. Ardent Keath told her she should enthuse about the new school of painting, which was aggressively anti-feminist, and which proclaimed in its own indecent way the Kaiser's maxim: "Children, Church and Cookery," with the last two items left out. "That's partly why I like it, of course. It seems a herald of returning sanity."

Hanbury's share of this conversation had been simply to note Hilda Concannon's name, and determine to "tease" the young woman should he meet her. He goggled his eyes above his plate.

Steven Young talked of the Library censorship, and Miss Fitch imagined its reading new novels

"with the zest for shocks of a child on a switch-back."

"Do you expect your new novel to be put on the Index?"

"Alas, no; I am not one of those to whom all things are pure," laughed Miss Fitch.

Ardent Keath marshalled the conversation towards the Standard Authors, and enunciated, "Keats is nectar in a golden cup, Shelley a libation poured out for the gods."

("I suppose he's been trying all dinner-time to say that," thought Miss Fitch.)

By the time they had reached dessert the talk had become more personal. Mrs. Arden lamented the approaching marriage of a girl friend to an elderly, ugly widower.

"But, Alicia, you've always wanted everyone to get married!" protested Mrs. Eckstein.

"But she's such a *nice* girl," lamented Mrs. Arden.

"That's the worst of it," said Steven Young, "all girls are such nice girls."

They discussed the prospective husband and how much character was responsible for action. "And after all," Miss Fitch assured them, "no man can foresee his past."

Thus encouraged, the men were left to their cigarettes.

Mrs. Hamel led the way into the music-room. It was a lofty, octagonal chamber, with a shallow wooden roof. This ceiling and all the other wooden surfaces, swing-doors and window frames Hamel had painted after the futurist fashion in brilliant red, blue, green, yellow, black. The wall spaces

were white and held round mirrors and candle sconces of gold-bronze, the curtains were of white silk; the carpet, woven in China, was like snow. The coverings of the chairs and sofas repeated the colours of the ceiling, their frames were black, gold-lacquered; black was the large piano, and the music cabinet gold-encrusted. A line of gold-bronze edged the doors, the handles were the same. It was this room that gave Hamel the reputation in Otterbridge of having all the fittings of his house of gold.

At the side of the room farthest from the piano was the fireplace, with its great bronzed fender and flamboyant hearthrug. On the mantelpiece, as yet unset, leant the enamelled plates upon which Hilda and Pandolefsky had shown their skill.

Round the fire was the inevitable group of soft chairs and Mrs. Hamel's sofa. She contented herself with merely sitting upon it this evening, and placing her feet, in their brocaded shoes, upon a gilt-legged tabouret in front of her. She seemed more than ever a Dresden shepherdess amidst the barbaric splendour.

Mrs. Hanbury settled her black satin and lace into the other corner of the sofa and made, as Mrs. Hamel inwardly commented, an admirable fire-screen; Miss Fitch lit her cigarette and amused Mrs. Arden and Mrs. Eckstein on the other side of the hearth. The grey cat, following a maid-servant with the coffee, coiled itself on Mrs. Hamel's knees.

"I wish—" said Mrs. Eckstein, drawing close to the blaze—"I wish I hadn't left off my petticoat to try and make Ernst think I'm growing thinner."

"Oh, my dear, don't want to be thinner," said

Miss Fitch, "I feel my skin too tight for my bones."

"I can hardly eat a meal without dread," said Mrs. Eckstein cheerfully. "I know so well what I shall be like in ten more years."

"You must strive to be a mystic like me," said Miss Fitch, "and I will strive to become—what is your religion?—a connoisseur, isn't it?"

Mrs. Hanbury was discoursing of her own affairs, her soup-kitchen, and the paper she had read a week ago to the body called in secret by her friends "The Society for Enduring with Equanimity the Sufferings of Others."

Mrs. Hamel did not even pretend to be listening, but stroked the grey cat.

"For Anthony's sake I will endure this woman," her expression said.

Then Mrs. Hanbury spoke of the less satisfactory element in her existence, and told how her boy, her son, her Archibald, was going to Boarding School next term.

"I want him to go in the summer, he'll be less liable to catch cold then. But it will be a wrench for me."

"How old is your little boy?" asked Mrs. Arden who had children of her own.

"He is just eight. He has never slept anywhere but in the little room off mine since he was born. We shall both have to be brave."

"Don't you think it rather hard lines on such a little child?"

"His father and I want to make a man of him."

"Hurrying Nature a little, isn't it?" from Miss Fitch.

Mrs. Hanbury assumed her platform manner. Rearing her head on her clumsy neck, she asked Mrs. Arden—

“Have you a boy of your own?”

“No,” said Mrs. Arden, “mine are girls.”

“Ah!” cried Mrs. Hanbury, sure now that her self-satisfaction was fully justified, “when you have a boy you will understand.”

She divided her sex into “Women” and “Women who have no sons.”

“I think,” said Mrs. Hamel languidly, “I like a man to have been through the mill.”

“Isn’t college time enough?” asked Mrs. Eckstein, who, neither having nor desiring children, still liked to share the new ideas.

And, “Isn’t there a danger of going in pig and coming out sausage?” from Miss Fitch.

And, “The grinding of the mills of God would come quite soon enough for me,” from Mrs. Arden.

Mrs. Hanbury, sure now of the support of her divine hostess, changed to a personal topic.

“I love to watch you with your cat. You handle her so lovingly, so—so—beautifully,” she said.

“I treat her as you treat your children, perhaps,” said Mrs. Hamel sincerely and pathetically.

“Poor Pussy!” thought the three others, and found it difficult not to laugh. They liked each other warmly after this brief alliance.

They began to discuss the latest crop of engagements and marriages among their friends, a conversation that to anyone outside their circle would be as incomprehensible as the telegraph’s clicking or flash of the heliograph.

“I suppose you’ve met Maisy’s man?” “I

thought him charming." "His people are frightfully opposed to it." "Well, after all, seven seasons, dear—" "It was idiotic to bring her out so soon, she was much too young and not the attractive sort of immaturity either." "I met her in the High Street yesterday looking radiant." "And *did* you hear that Christine is married already? My dear, yes! And came back in time for the new play. She received people at the reception on the stage afterwards. The Müllers told me about it. They thought it quite too courageous of her." "Really, the Müllers! When I go into that house I feel I am behind the Purdah. They think of nothing but babies, babies, babies, and how they manage to get into the world." "I hear the adoring Rufus has defected at last." "Yes, who is the new star?" "A Miss Hopkinson; rather nice, I believe. Her sister married Henry O'Kane." "Isn't that the girl whose brother made such a fool of himself in Mexico?" "No, that's a cousin. There are scores of them. I knew Chirpy quite well." "Hasn't he a brother in the Education Office—a man with wonderful eyelashes?" "Yes, that's the one. I didn't notice the eyelashes, though. Then there's C.L. and R.T.C. and D.G.M. and Claude. Simply hundreds." And so on until the door opened and it was necessary to be intellectual again.

## CHAPTER III

### INTRODUCES THE HEROINE

THROUGH the swing-doors came Hilda Concannon and Nelly Hayes.

Nelly was wearing a white dress that had been her mother's. The hooks were off at the back, but, as she said, her hair hid that. Such hair! Masses of it, yellow, hanging below her waist, straight had it not been so vigorous. Grey eyes, dark-browed, a wide pink mouth, a delicate nose with freckles on it, a white skin, and that poised air of girlhood that suggests light instead of blood flowing in the veins! She came in graceful and confident. Nelly did not know that what made her face strangers so securely was the fact that she was always the most beautiful person in a room.

Mrs. Hamel roused herself a little and greeted them.

"Forgive my not rising. I am chained to my sofa," she said. "This is my husband's pupil, Miss Concannon, and you must be her friend, Miss Hayes?" she introduced them to the others.

They all smiled and shook hands or bowed, and the girls found themselves the focus of a hostile scrutiny, the subconscious warfare between women and girls. The breach was crossed by Miss Fitch, who had met Hilda before, and they were soon engaged in animated talk.

Nelly sat down near Mrs. Hamel, and, finding that lady unaccountably silent, began to talk with her habitual smile.

"How you must love living in this house!"

"Do you think so?"

Mrs. Hamel narrowed her eyes. She was noticing the torn lace at the girl's throat and the zigzag line of scarlet cotton with which some laundry had signified its innocence of a rent at the hem of her dress. Nelly had left the red thread there "for luck."

"I've never seen any house like it before."

Mrs. Hanbury, perceiving an opportunity to snub, said, "There isn't anything like it. Mrs. Hamel's house is unique."

"That is unlucky for the rest of you, isn't it?" replied Nelly sweetly. As she would have expressed it, Mrs. Hanbury got no change out of her. All the same the thrust was an effort, and a sudden reaction sent tears pricking to her eyelids.

"Have you left Ireland long?" asked Mrs. Hamel. There was so little interest in her voice that the question was not a solicitude, but an impertinence.

"A thousand years," said Nelly.

Mrs. Hanbury again advanced to the slaughter.

"I got some Irish novels out of Mudie's the other day. Why is it, can you tell me, that Irish novels are all so bad?"

She opened her eyes triumphantly above her rudeness. Poor Nelly, who knew too little of any literature to care to talk about it, flushed and was silent. It was Miss Fitch who took up the cudgels.

"Oh, please don't say that," she cried. "I claim

Irish blood, you know." And then, because the girl was so pretty, "Besides, Miss Hayes may have written novels herself."

The fury in Miss Fitch's glance so outbalanced the moderation of her tongue that Mrs. Hanbury was quite discomfited.

They were all glad when the men joined them.

Ernst Eckstein was to play after dinner. He, with Keath and Anthony, had been discussing bookbinding and rare editions and describing their latest acquisitions. The other three had been talking politics; at least Hanbury had been talking, while Fylie and Steven Young disagreed with him. It was a three-cornered fight, Steven holding extreme Socialist opinions, Fylie arguing in favour of small holdings and "general tweediness," Hanbury rolling his thick lips round his cigar, expressing his faith in the greed and irremediable corruption of man's heart. He was a cynic and took pride in it.

As they passed down the wide corridor, its ebon floor reflecting the white walls and slender furnishings, he paused to admire some engravings, heads of gentle girls, and said to Hamel—

"I always envy you these."

"I keep them to remind myself that there was a type of English beauty before the Gaiety girl was invented."

"Oh, come," said Hanbury; "I rather like the Gaiety girl."

"Well, you may keep her," said Anthony.

"My dear fellow, I shouldn't have proposed to do that even in my most lascivious days," chuckled Hanbury.

They passed on.

"How Hamel does detest a certain type of woman!" murmured Steven.

"Lead us not into temptation," suggested Arden.

They grinned.

They entered the music-room.

"And who," each of them asked himself, "is the girl talking to Mrs. Hamel?"

Ernst Eckstein played to them. Some of that new music at once so elemental and delicate. Nature observed by the man of science and expressed by the poet. The minute flickering world of leaves and grass-blades, blue bells on their hair-like stems ringing together, mist, raindrops falling on burdocks, fine rain driving across meadows, then roses, heaped roses, white and without thorns, the sun shines out, somewhere among the glistening branches a bird breaks into song. When he had done he crossed the room and sat down beside his wife. He was a sophisticated young man. He had expressed the opinion that the keenest joy civilization has to offer is the entering of a crowded room with a perfectly dressed woman. Nelly Hayes, obviously, was not to his taste.

Mrs. Hamel found her ill-health a useful check to any prompting that might make her do something agreeable, so she did not introduce any of the men to Nelly Hayes. If she had surmised that such exertion would not be required of her, she would have been quite right. Hilda, of course, had met Steven Young—he had been to The Height several times already—and after saluting Anthony with a wave of her hand, they began to

talk together. Steven did not ask to be presented to her friend. He sat where he could watch her.

"Well, what do you think of her?" asked Hilda proudly.

"I haven't begun to think yet," said Steven. "I'm content to look."

Anthony had gone at once to present himself. He knew his wife's little ways and was not troubled by them.

"Well, beautiful person," he said, "and what is your name?"

He lowered his voice, but made no suggestion of secrecy.

"My friends call me 'Nelly,'" said that young woman, smiling up at him.

"Then I shall call you 'Nelly,' too," said he.

They got on very well together.

Hanbury, after wandering about and finding that no one intended to introduce him, settled himself near Hilda and listened to what she and Young were saying. It was not a particularly interesting conversation from a listener's point of view, for they were discussing "national characteristics" and "religious differences," and, as Mr. Hanbury phrased it to himself, "God knows what all."

"We must be continental rather than insular," Hilda was saying. "We shall never have a national dress or a national art while we are self-conscious about it. That's where I quarrel with the movement—"

"What we need is the truth. Unpalatable but wholesome." "Good taste must come naturally. It isn't fair to expect people who live in wretchedness to put on ideals as we put on hats." "Only wealth

and no fear of poverty will put the old spending spirit back into the country." "Ah, if only the Churches would teach a little vanity!" "My people, though, refute you. We have money in the North, but we don't know how to spend it. Oh, Ballygrawna." "The closed range—" "But it isn't fair to ask people to cook at an open fire; it's lovely-looking, of course, but what are we to do?" "Surely the pot-oven makes excellent bread?" "A fable, my dear Stevie; an old wives' tale!" "Beauty is suspect in Ireland." "Quite rightly. You haven't gone through the reign of Queen Victoria there yet—solid comfort, you know!"

Mr. Hanbury was quite out of it.

"I'm a furious anti-Catholic. No, it's *not* my *Northern* blood. I'm jealous for my own religion. Whoever heard of a Protestant who called himself an intellectual not reading a book because a stupid man in a shovel hat condemned it?"

"Isn't that because so few 'intellectuals' call themselves Protestants?" "Perhaps. But that artificial purity of mind, Stevie, wax flowers!" "Better than none, I think." "Savages for me, rather!" "Study anthropology!" They both laughed. "No, but," said Hilda, "it's the Church's attitude to the whole of modern life that infuriates me. Every spring I see some idiotic bishop has been thumping his pulpit in a Lenten Pastoral, forsooth! Thinking because he's fat and stupid he can crush the life out of Socialism and Suffragism, and everything that's decent. Such asinine attacks!"

A grain of comfort for poor Mr. Hanbury. He

rolled into a more upright posture, and said: "You know, Miss Concannon, though I agree with many of the things you've said, and I must say that you express yourself admirably, I think the bishops are right there. Man, you know, has made a very special place in his imagination for woman, Miss Concannon."

"Ah, but what sort of place has he made for her in reality?"

"Not such a bad place, I think. Think of all the nice houses, the jewels, the clothes. Why, civilization, Miss Concannon, is the tribute man lays at woman's feet."

"Especially in Bermondsey!" cried Hilda.

"Isn't that a trifle irrelevant? The men don't have too swagger a time there either."

"Well, that's part of what we are complaining about."

"Surely a rich woman is as much a tyrant as a rich man?" suggested Steven.

"Yes, I admit that, but—"

"Well, then?"

"Oh, what's the use of giving us pretty things and denying us equality?"

"You are our superiors."

"But you sneer at us!"

"Don't servants in the kitchen sneer at their masters?"

"You seem to be getting the best of it," said Hilda, "but all the same I know how suffering and humiliated women are."

"Oh, but for that you must blame Nature."

"Nature for a woman usually turns up in the form of a man," commented Miss Fitch, joining in.

"Really, dear ladies, we are paying you a compliment in refusing the vote. We are quite satisfied with you as you are."

"Ah, but the question is—are we satisfied with you?"

"You let woman tidy your houses, your streets: why not your habits and customs?"

"I am afraid I am a hopeless Anti," said Mr. Hanbury.

"That doesn't matter," said Miss Fitch cheerfully, "so long as you are susceptible."

"Heresy!" protested Hilda.

So the babble went on, a stream of sound broken occasionally by a leaping silvery fish of laughter. Miss Fitch said—

"To be praised by an opponent is almost the same thing as to be called a fool!"

"Well, I prefer to be called a fool politely!"

"As bad as having your throat cut with a jammy knife!"

"Or to be stunned with a peach instead of a stone?"

"But when you came to you could eat the peach."

This was Nelly's contribution. She had no idea that the conversation was merely flitting among metaphors. They enjoyed her *naïveté* and thought it intentional.

Hilda presently detected unmistakable signs of weariness on Mrs. Hamel's face, so she said good-bye and took Nelly away with her. Anthony came out into the hall with them then and put Nelly's coat on for her—a cheap unlined green woollen coat. It looked strange in his hands. Steven Young escorted them down the hill with a lantern.

## CHAPTER IV

### SECOND IMPRESSION

NELLY HAYES, drowsing in her bed at Elkins's, yawned and stretched herself. The window-blind, rattling smartly in the wind, filled and drew up with a swishing sound, and a ribbon of sunlight ran up the wall. That yellow ribbon had lain, on its first appearance in the room, across the foot of Nelly's bed, and, touching in succession the door, the washstand, the text over the mantelpiece and the white-petticoated dressing-table, now showed itself on the opposite wall. It was eleven o'clock.

Outside was the tumult of a March morning. Boughs swayed, gates creaked. Posse of sparrows, jabbering wildly, flung themselves across the garden. Every twig glittered. In the north-west pillars of white clouds stood up in a sky intensely blue. Behind the house Mrs. Elkins's ducks chorused together. A horse was led by its slow hooves sounding on the stones, "chock, chock, chock, chock," and a jingle of harness. Half a day's work was done.

Nelly Hayes, stretching again luxuriously, clasped her hands behind her head and screwed up her little nose. Then she thrust it caressingly into the softness of her arm. Her flesh was fragrant, spicy, like rose-leaves. She enjoyed the

smell of it. Her yellow hair strewed her bosom. On her lips peeped a little smile. She was thinking.

Hilda long ago had fastened her neat blouse and started to her work.

"I think you might come up and see the studio this afternoon," she had said in the intervals of dressing. "I don't think Mr. Hamel would mind."

"Oh, I expect not," Nelly had answered, feeling herself already his close friend.

"We always work hard in the mornings," Hilda had said. "But in the afternoons we relax a bit. We mustn't disturb the routine in any way, because it's all rather important."

"I'll be a mouse," said Nelly.

"You know, Mr. Hamel is a tremendous swell, though he never puts on side," said Hilda, who felt Nelly's attitude to savour just a trifle of "cheek."

"He was awfully kind yesterday," said Nelly.

"Yes; he wants to draw you. We mustn't let him forget." (Forget!)

Hilda put on her hat.

"Mrs. Elkins will give you some sort of lunch, Nelly. I always lunch at The Height. And there are some books of mine in the sitting-room, if you'd like to read. When you come up this afternoon come in by the little iron gate in the lane. It's unlocked in the day-time. There's no need to go by the house. Mrs. Hamel doesn't like to be bothered with people."

"She's a proposition," said Nelly.

"Well, she isn't precisely as amiable as her husband," admitted Hilda.

"Don't you worry about me, dear," said Nelly. "I shall be quite happy."

"And another thing." Hilda put her head in at the door. "Don't flirt with Pandolefsky."

Nelly opened eyes at her.

"Goo! goo!" cried Hilda derisively. "But I really mean it. He's forbidden fruit. The Apple of Eden. *Such* an object!"

She was gone.

Nelly listened till the brisk footsteps grew inaudible and the iron gate had swung clangingly to silence. Then she turned over and had a small sleep.

Pandolefsky, indeed—*whoever* he might be! Well, she expected to have a good time, anyway.

The dark eyelashes drooped.

It took Nelly Hayes a long time to get dressed, especially on a state occasion such as this. With her brief, though not uninteresting, experience of the world, she knew that to make an impression is child's play; the difficulty is to confirm it. There were long delays in the toilet. Wrapped in her old silk dressing-gown, where birds with outstretched necks flew amid a mass of scarlet blossoms and coffee stains, she sat and darned her stockings. She mended a loop at the neck of her blouse. She had to wait for her hair to dry, too, after her bath; it was no use trying to do it while the front locks were wet. She was not oppressed by loneliness. So much of it had been her share since her life began. Her patchwork life! Satin by the side of sackcloth. These for the present were dimity days. She did not trouble herself about the future. Disagreeable things, once past, ceased to be keenly

disagreeable. Sitting on the edge of her bed, with knees crossed and slim foot swinging, the gaiety that rippled over her in company was translated to a warm stillness. Her eyes held the basking tranquillity of a cat on a wall.

She put on her much-worn garments carefully. When she dressed with this precision her shabbiness enhanced her. Her one brown suit had served on all occasions. To run to the ham-and-beef shop, or—rare event—to go to see a friend. For this occasion she would put on her gloves before her jacket. That made all the difference.

At last she was ready. She left her room and descended the noisy stairs. She roamed about the sitting-room, whistling softly, examining everything, curious, inattentive, while Mrs. Elkins was preparing lunch. She read the names on books: Shaw and Francis Adams, Conrad, Lecky, a Life of Garibaldi. She had no intention of reading them. Mrs. Elkins's own collection—*Nothing to Nobody*, *Georgie Merton*, and the *Adventures of Jimmy Brown*, left by a former lodger—would have interested her more.

Mrs. Elkins brought in her dinner. Grilled steak hard as leather, and potatoes; stewed rhubarb and "shape." She talked while the girl ate.

"Don't you never feel lonely all alone, Miss? If I was to set still for a minute I couldn't abear myself. I have to be running about the house or feeding the chickens, or something. Setting idle with me hands in me lap would fair knock me."

Nelly flavoured a hostile criticism in her speech.

"Don't you never do no fancywork or nothing, Miss?" she questioned.

"I didn't bring any with me." Nelly laughed to herself. She remembered various pieces of "fancywork" sinking through a degradation of tangled silks and lost needles to oblivion.

"Taking a holiday, I suppose, Miss? Well, we all needs a rest at times. Would you care to see my chickens, Miss? Very early for them. I shall have a job to rear them, I expect."

Nelly made the tour of the farm buildings, lazily sympathetic, listening at any rate. She carried the farm kitten upon her shoulder, pink-nosed and full of fleas.

The afternoon held disappointment. Anthony had gone away that morning with the Hanburys in their motor-car. Nelly, as she climbed the steep path to the studio, had "somehow felt" that she should not see him. The wet black earth, as yet unpierced by any green thing, was devoid of promise. The narrow skirting path, repeating in miniature the broad steps and terraces of the main garden, made her feel furtive and intrusive. She was trespassing. Mr. Hamel's invitation gave her no sense of right there. She found herself hoping that she would not be seen. Through the bare fruit trees, as yet unflecked with chalk-white buds, she could see the broad expanses of the lawns and hear the voices of the men who were laying turf there. The steepness of the bank hid the house from her. She was a solitary wayfarer under the cold, translucent dome of the sky. She felt suddenly that inexplicable sense of heartache and mystery that loneliness gives to a child. How should she look to Mr. Hamel to welcome her? Why should she expect anywhere secure footing

or a home? Her confidence left her as if a warm cloak had been stripped away. It was a humble little girl at last who reached the studio door.

Hilda was on the look-out for her.

"Come along," she said; "I can show you everything. We have it quite to ourselves."

Nelly's heart contracted at the news. Hilda talked on, emphasizing, explaining.

The studio was very large, lit from above, and surrounded by a slender gallery. It had windows also, facing south and north, big, prominent bays that could be shut off from the large room at will by sliding-doors. The southern one contained Hilda's table; the northern was Pandolefsky's den.

Above them the gallery broadened into narrow upstair-rooms. The furnace dominated the western wall, and beside it the iron cooling table. These were immediately visible from the door. In that there was a wicket.

"When we are working, anyone who comes with a message has to peep through there before they knock, for fear they'd startle us at a critical moment. 'Wait for the stroke'—you know the sort of thing. If you wobble, putting things into the furnace, you mess up your whole design. It's hard not to at first, though, especially if it's a very large plate. You have to hold it steady in the mouth of the oven for a minute or two till the water dries off. Then it's all in powder again. Then in it goes. There's a frightful row if Mr. Hamel is interrupted just then."

Anthony was "frightfully fussy" at his work, apparently. They had to live at the same tem-

perature all the year round, and terrible things were said if the studio was too hot or too cold.

A little staircase curved above the door. The air was full of the scent of matting and freshly planed wood. Built into the wall were immense presses.

"When he comes back I expect he'll show you the jewels."

"Is he away, then?"

"Yes. He went this morning with the Hanburys. He's building them a house somewhere. He's hardly ever at home all the week."

Nelly's spirits, beaten to the water, as it were, by adverse gales, dipped, rose again, and sprang forward. She was positively glad. It was a respite, a relief. She would be able to poke about and enjoy herself without wondering all the time how she was looking and what was being thought of her. Hilda, secured all her life by money, a definite home, above all by her impersonal interest in things and her splendid cocksureness, had no conception of the desperate toil that the company of fellow-beings meant to Nelly. Hilda, who did the right things instinctively and cared no jot if she didn't, knew nothing of the doubts and shames that wrangled with gaiety in Nelly's breast. The girl was not yet sure of her charm, not certain if she were strong enough to "carry things off." She knew she could not be the conventional young lady; she had not mastered the courage to be herself. Her ingenuousness and ignorance, attractive as it was, humiliated her. She was wearied with the burden of trying to please people. Men she found very easy to please; with women her soul became hesitating and servile.

Only Mrs. Hamel, however, with her barbed intelligence sharpened and perhaps just brushed with venom after many years of spectatorhood, could say of her thus accurately (as she had said the night before to Anthony): "Too anxious to please."

Hilda would at any time have scorned to be troubled by the trifles that tormented Nelly—whom to shake hands with first; what implements to choose from those beside her plate at meal-times; how much ice-pudding to take without being greedy; whether the hole in her stocking showed above the heel of her shoe; a dread of spilling her tea into her lap. Hilda never troubled in the least how she appeared. It was just her warm sympathy of heart that made her realize a little of what Nelly suffered. She responded to the pain, though she would have derided its cause. She was full of love for her *protégée*.

She showed Nelly the glass they ground for the enamels, holding the rich slabs up to the light so that they glowed. The bowl of acid, the sheets of copper, the hammers, the shears.

Nelly flung open the window and leaned out.

"How beautiful it is! I should never do a stroke of work here."

Before her was the loveliest of English landscapes. Small woods and pasture-land, the broad weald with its chess-board of fields and hedges, scattered roofs, hillocks and hollows, an intricacy of brownness and greenness stretching away into the distance, to the blue hills and the invisible sea.

(Anthony regarded it as the justification of his

art. When younger men heckled him, saying, "An artist must reveal life as it really is," he would challenge them, laughing, "Well, come down, then, and see what I really see. *I* couldn't make hideous things without lying." This house of his was courteous response to loveliness.)

The girls gazed in silence. A white line of smoke like a hurrying caterpillar pushed its way across the country, coming from whence, going whither? They watched it out of sight.

Nelly sighed. "Lucky you!" It was the nearest she could approach to envy.

Hilda thought of her as a drifter in miserable seas cast suddenly upon an island.

"Stay with me as long as you can," she said.

Nelly squeezed her hand.

## CHAPTER V

### PRELUDE TO AN UNPLEASANT CONCLUSION

HILDA was hammering a copper plate. As her strokes fell on the metal she sang briskly.

*My heart ever faithful,  
Sing prai-aises, be joy-oyful,  
Sing prai-ai-ses, be joy-oy-oy-yful.*

She was making what she called a "beautiful row." Her ears were deliberately full of it. It shut out something she was anxious to hear.

Nelly was lounging in the arm-chair by the stove. The sunlight poured in upon her. Pandolefsky, seated on a low stool, pencil and block in hand, was making a drawing of her. He had attempted half-a-dozen in the past two days. Now Hilda had stated expressly that she hoped Nelly would be admired, and that Mr. Hamel would make drawings of her. If Mr. Hamel, why not Pandolefsky? Clearly she was illogical. She had brought the girl here. She had talked of her in the studio as well as in the house to Mrs. Hamel. Why, then, was she not better pleased with the effect she had made? Was this effect of Hilda's making, though? She had advertised the grace and beauty of the girl, her unexpectedness, her unprotectedness, her mingled diffidence and boldness, the occasional soft whirring of her Irish accent, her homelessness, the romantic mystery of her name. She had not

mentioned the little faults, sharply contrasted as they were with the girl's indisputable dowry, the untidiness, the undaintiness of her, the fact that she said "an enemy" when she meant "anemone," the indiscreet comments and revelations that, however combated, popped time and again out of her tell-tale mouth.

"You know, Hilda," she had said one day, "I never feel sure if I am talking properly. I never know just what I ought to say."

"My dear," cried Hilda, "say whatever comes into your head, of course. I don't know any other rule!"

"Ah, but you don't know the things that come into my head," Nelly responded sadly. She never patronized Hilda for her comparative inexperience. Above everything, when she thought at all, Nelly longed to be as other girls were, limited, and ignorant, and unfeeling.

"It's horrible to know the sort of things I know," she complained.

"Oh, I mean to know everything," said Hilda with her customary vigour, "anything that is good enough to happen is good enough to know about."

"Ah, but it's different for you."

If she could have put words on her thought she might have said that a conscious knowledge of evil had the beauty of mastery, but that the evil that was never thought about at all, that just soaked in and overwhelmed you, *that* had the ignominy of defeat. Such a reasoning Hilda could have agreed with, for the one thing she could not endure was invictoriousness. For that reason the less of sex a woman had about her the more she admired her. Nelly would listen in mute submission to her invec-

tive against loss of self-control? "What is civilization except self-control?" "What is the use of self-knowledge if it doesn't help you to control yourself?" And so on, so many words to Nelly, who without understanding, felt in her bones that Hilda did not know what she was talking about. She admired Hilda for this ignorance, however, more than for her positive qualities, and more than she admired Hilda she admired the tradition that had brought her up so blessedly untouched by experience. Because Hilda disliked that tradition she had learnt all sorts of things with her head, but her body had never taught her anything; her body, in fact, would perhaps never learn anything. She puzzled Nelly.

To the accompaniment of her hammering Hilda grimly pursued her thoughts, or rather, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, held her thoughts from her.

"Don't look like that," said Pandolefsky under cover of the noise, "you madden me."

Nelly trailed her eyelashes at him.

"I mean it. Some night, when you are asleep, I shall come and carry you off."

"That will be quite exciting."

Nelly smiled provokingly. He was such a comical little figure with his stumpy bitten fingers and his legs filling his trousers like bolsters in bolster cases.

"I stick at nothing."

"In fact, you're a devil when you're roused."

"I shall make you stop laughing at me."

"Would you rather I scowled instead?"

Silence.

"It is no good trying to draw you," he exclaimed after a moment, "why don't you keep still?"

"I do keep still!"

"You don't. You don't even try. Turn your head a little."

"Say 'please.'"

He sprang up, seized her chin, and jerked her head into the right position. "There!"

"How dare you touch me?"

"It's your own fault. You dared me to do it. You should wear a label, 'Not to be touched.' It would make things plainer."

"Don't be rude!"

"Bah! As if you cared whether I am rude or not? You do not care what men say to you as long as you are admired. You are a coquette, Mademoiselle. There, it is spoiled." With a vicious movement he tore the sketch in half. Hilda, hearing the altercation, turned round.

"Hulloa, what's the matter?"

"Only Mr. Pandolefsky's idiotic temper."

Nelly was enjoying herself. She was entirely accomplished in the technique of 'scenes.' The tension preceding an outbreak enlivened her.

Hilda remonstrated. "Really you are a nuisance, you two."

They had done no serious work for three days. It vexed her that for all warnings Nelly should be flirting with Pandolefsky. That they were flirting was undeniable, and yet Nelly made fun of the little man. She could not be accused of encouraging him. She was, if anything, too contemptuous. She obeyed all Hilda's theoretical rules, and yet the situation was most unsatisfactory. Hilda main-

tained that the only sort of women for whom sex relations were not undignified were women like Thaïs or Semiramis, whose beauty brought all men suing to their feet, while their own hearts remained cold. She felt it to be an excellent theory, and yet, while there was Pandolefsky suing and literally at Nelly's feet on the studio floor, she was irritated. Somehow she did not like anyone to have really personal relations with Pandolefsky. Emotion of any sort in his regard was a familiarity. They had been so cool and pleasant and impersonal and polite in the studio before. It was like rousing the admiration of a waiter, of a shop-boy. It was too flattering to the creature. What a hateful snob she was! But she couldn't help it. She could not bear Pandolefsky to be flattered at Nelly's expense, and that was what it came to. Why didn't he see what a worm he was and how they mocked him? She hammered furiously.

She understood nothing. The simple rules of the game of provocation would have seemed to her merely disgusting. She could hear Nelly's exaggerated snubs, but she could not see the message of her eyes and of the lines of her body. Pandolefsky could see it. It was the old challenge of a man's physical strength—defiance and then flight. Pandolefsky rejoiced in it even when it angered him. As yet the scuffle was one of looks and words. It was ignominious, nevertheless.

"I must not and will not be a prig," resolved Hilda.

Going down to Elkins's that evening she hinted her doubts to Nelly.

"It doesn't matter how many men you flirt with,"

responded that young woman, "provided you don't fall in love with any of them. And I *don't* think you need be alarmed about Master Pandolefsky."

Hilda was content that this was a triumphant doctrine. She could not prevision that Pandolefsky would succeed in catching and kissing her little friend in the orchard next morning.

"Nelly is gloriously beautiful," she thought. "She is sure to be splendid."

So Anthony, returning to his studio, found Nelly established there. He was in good spirits, kind, vivacious, interested with apparent profundity in the people about him. The novelty of the girl's bright presence pleased him. He unlocked the big steel-lined doors of the presses and displayed their treasures. Nelly made an exotic and fascinating spectacle—a wood-nymph strayed into civilization, Psyche in the house of love. Her wonder and delight were so simple. Really to touch these things, to run her hands through them! She sat on the floor, her hair illumined by a beam of dusty sunshine, and received the jewels in her lap. Anthony, amused at her frank pleasure, heaped them upon her. Radiant pearls, chrysoprase and garnet, dim milky opals, chrysolite and sapphire, "and the ones you will like best," aquamarines, blue-green and sparkling like the sea. "Oh, yes, I like these best of all."

He showed her a pendant he was making: an orange tree, revealing through its branches the south wind touching the strings of a lute.

"This is for a lady who comes from Spain, *via* the United States. Someday when you are rich and famous I'll make something for you."

"Oh, I shall have to wait a desperate time, then."

He chaffed her. "Anyone could see you were destined to wear your diamonds at the opera."

She shook her head. "Joey Harrison doesn't care for music."

"And who, pray, is Joey Harrison?"

"He's my *fiancé*," replied Nelly, with startling simplicity. "I shall have to marry him some day. I'd rather not talk about him."

She inspected a jewel against the end of her hair.

"My dearest child, you mustn't talk of marriage like that."

Seeing the impression she had made she described the predestined ogre.

"And he has tufts in his ears and red hair on the backs of his hands—" she completed the picture. It made a great sensation. Andromeda menaced by the sea monster could not have aroused more sympathy and apprehension. Hilda had not before treated as serious the talk of "Joey Harrison who pays the bills." Shocked from her calm disbelief, she chafed for a rescue.

"You must refuse to do such a thing. You can't be coerced. Nelly, it's horrible!"

"Ah, well, I just don't bother about it. I've a year or two, anyway." She smiled her careless smile. "Time enough to think about it then."

They visioned her after this with a crooked horror ever at her heels. It was the required note of romance.

## CHAPTER VI

### ASIDE

MRS. HAMEL took but little part in the comings and goings at The Height. It was one of Anthony's principles that his old friends should not disappear before his rising fame; also, though he cared very much for their artistic perceptions and preferences, he cared nothing at all for the sort of lives they led. When, on one or two occasions his wife attempted argument, he had remarked with impatience that he did not propose to write biography. "As long as I like them I am quite satisfied." In consequence some really atrocious people had turned up occasionally, and yet Anthony had never allowed Lady Kayle Podsnap to be asked a second time, though the daughter of a duke and morally irreproachable, because he had heard her say that she liked Murillo. He called her "that horrid woman," "perverse," and a "slug-eater"; incidentally, the poor lady was very plain.

Mrs. Hamel had at first presented an opposition of feigned chilliness; but in the end she had been forced to yield. It was a veritable martyrdom for the poor little lady, and she did not attempt to disguise her annoyance from her own friends. That was why she invited Miss Fitch and Mrs. Arden so often, and Mrs. Eckstein, who had been at school with her (though *she*, indeed, was a little

too smart to be quite relied upon). They made at any rate, whatever their opinions, a reputable barrier between their hostess and the unspeak-toables. They could keep a party together and laugh at their own tolerance, and they enabled Mrs. Hamel, when she felt her moral sense strained beyond endurance, to spend the week-end comfortably in bed.

Never once was she known to waver or hesitate, or soften her glassy precision. Throned in her great bed, with its faintly garlanded hangings, she could lie and polish her nails or read the latest novel, and let the news of the house reach her purified, filtered, as it were, through other eyes and mouths. She thought that a social wreck should be a complete one.

"I could forgive a woman who really sacrificed *everything* for love," she sometimes said.

"Sacrificing everything" meant also that she would not be likely to have to meet the lady. These new, unsinkable craft were an abomination. She often said that a wave of depravity was sweeping over England. She wished, if people must elope, that they would elope to South Africa or New Zealand, not to West End addresses. It made her feel that her own virtue was a little wasted if these bad people were so prosperous.

She disliked the women more than she disliked the men. For these she could, to a certain extent, make allowances. She did not mind harbouring them, as it were, so long as she was not expected, even for courtesy's sake, to modify her views. She could permit them, in rare *tête-à-tête* conversings, to tell her that she was not as other women were.

"I suppose not," she would say, drooping her eyelids modestly and lifting up her head. She could almost like them as long as their womenfolk did not intrude. "I have never seen the creature, and so far as I am concerned she does not exist." When, as sometimes happened, one of these men, revealing unsuspected depths of both "real" and "moral" feeling, married a former mistress, or went for her sake through the dirt of the divorce court, Mrs. Hamel adopted an attitude towards him of contemptuous pity : "Surely it was not necessary for him to *marry* her ! "

"But, Erica," Miss Fitch might expostulate, "you used to complain before because they weren't married. Now you complain because they are ! "

"I suppose it's only a matter of 'feeling,'" Mrs. Hamel would reply sorrowfully. "You do not mind. Well, it makes things easier for you. I, unfortunately, cannot help feeling strongly about these things. *Whatever* you say, I do not feel that such a union is the right basis for happy married life. Marriage is a little more, to my mind, than the mating of beasts."

They would agree with her on that point, and, to tell the truth, most of her relentless hostilities were rather pleasing. They received from them such a sense of personal charitableness.

Or Mrs. Hamel would complain : "Surely there are plenty of charming girls unmarried. Why couldn't he choose one of them ? "

"Dear Erica, girls are becoming so hygienic nowadays, they aren't fascinated by the reformed rake any more."

Mrs. Hamel said she preferred not to discuss

that point. There were very many aspects of life which she preferred not to discuss.

Her favourite themes were those in the discussion of which she could conscientiously praise her own virtues and good luck, beginning with the fact that she had married at nineteen.

"She likes despising women," Hilda said to Miss Fitch as they descended the stairs together. "She simply revels in despising them."

"Faith, Hope and Chastity," murmured Miss Fitch, "and the greatest of these——"

Hilda herself Mrs. Hamel liked as much as she could be said to like any human being. She envied the girl nothing, thought her often ridiculous and told her so, but Hilda was above all things well behaved, she showed no disposition to make "a fool of herself," she could in safety have "an eye" taken off her.

"I don't much care what a woman says to me," Mrs. Hamel would say. "I am not shocked by plain speaking. But when she has talked Brotherhood of Man up here and then goes down and strokes her ankles in the drawing-room—frankly, it disgusts me. If they must come, they must. I don't wish to appear intolerant, but as I cannot exchange a word with them without having to say, 'I can't agree,' or (what would be nearer the truth) 'I know you are telling lies, and so do you,' it's tiring, and I prefer to remain upstairs. My bedroom, at least, is my own."

Even that bedroom was desiled on one occasion, however, when Lady Hallam, kindest and most generous of women, with one failing ("a modern Lucrezia Borgia" and "a female Henry VIII" she

was called in that sanctum), hearing of Mrs. Hamel's indisposition, came to make inquiries and remained seated on the foot of the bed for a whole afternoon.

"What I have suffered!" said poor Mrs. Hamel. She said to Hilda—

"I don't understand these women. My own friends, and the people from whom I come, fell in love and got married in church and led contented lives, and now we have nothing but the wildest talk and behaviour."

"Perhaps it's the mothers' fault," suggested Hilda. "They put up with all kinds of things, and now we have the reactions—like me."

"Oh, you're not like that. Your notions are absurd, of course, but you are a girl. I like girls to *be* girls, and married women to *be* married women, not—"

She checked herself.

"And men to be men?" suggested Hilda slyly.

Mrs. Hamel suspected the trap, for Hilda had caught her before.

"Men, and not paragons," she said.

"But what do you mean by that? You must give a definition."

"Well, that is fairly simple. I don't think a man ought to have a theory until he has a banking account. I like men to be well turned out and to be strong and capable and able to face things without two hundred silly scruples and considerations. I hate them to be goody-goody and interested in soul-states. I like to think that there are people in the world capable of doing things that I am afraid to do myself. As a matter of fact—"

she glanced downwards for a moment at her hands —“I like a man to be in the Army.”

She raised her eyes and gave Hilda a long glance, almost as if she had been talking to a Guardsman.

“Then, of course,” said Hilda, “you insist that this ideal gentleman must be spotlessly pure indeed. You can’t have your ‘womanly’ woman and your ‘manly’ man in the same world, you know. The ideals as at present defined clash hopelessly. They’ve got to be very, very good together or not at all.”

“Really, Hilda,” said Mrs. Hamel, “I don’t think the conversation is becoming quite nice.”

“And there she goes,” Hilda lamented to Miss Fitch, “before you have nailed her down, back into her prunes and prisms. She thinks she’s discussing an intellectual problem, while really it is simply ‘what I tell you three times is true.’”

“Cheer up, my child,” said Miss Fitch encouragingly; “nearly all arguments are just like that. Look at the Parliament Act !”

As may be supposed, Nelly was a great source of annoyance to Mrs. Hamel. The girl was so utterly without roots or background. She was sure Hilda’s “people” would disapprove the alliance.

“We have quite enough of a Wonder Zoo at The Height as it is without adding Hilda’s specimens,” she had remarked acidly.

She did not like the mixture of humbleness towards women and boldness towards men that she noted in Nelly. She told Hilda so.

“She’s not like that when you get to know her,” Hilda had asserted, in quick defence.

"I don't think I care very much for people that one has to *get* to know. We had a young man to stay with us once who used to help himself to fruit salad with his own spoon. They told me I should like *him* when I got to know him. But I never did get to know him. Even Tony did not insist upon asking him again. Tony does not really care for physical piggishness."

Her slow voice came back to Nelly.

"Why does she wriggle?" she asked absently.

"You make her nervous, I suppose," said Hilda. "You would make me nervous if I let you for a single moment."

Mrs. Hamel smiled, but she refused to be distracted from her quarry.

"She seems to me to alter the very tone of her voice when she speaks to a man."

"Yes, I know she makes a difference," said Hilda uncomfortably, "but then she hasn't any theories as to how she should behave, so she's quite consistent."

Mrs. Hamel ignored the thrust.

"What are her people?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked her."

"Publicans, I dare say. All the prettiest girls for the stage are recruited from publicans, I am told. They get better fed in their youth—or something. Or perhaps it was a sweet shop. I can imagine her selling sweets and cramming her mouth with all the extra ones."

("A recollection of school-days," thought Hilda.)

She said, "She told me her people had property in the South of Ireland. She lived there when she was a child."

"Land agents," said Mrs. Hamel.

"Perhaps. I don't think so. It doesn't matter, does it? She can sit a horse, at any rate."

"Circus riders!" cried Mrs. Hamel triumphantly. She was well pleased with this explanation.

From that on she sometimes referred to Nelly as the "circus rider."

## CHAPTER VII

### EARLY SOWING IN A WARM BORDER

NELLY HAYES, perched high on a straight-backed chair in the studio, watched the flies swinging and swimming in dizzying monotony from balcony to balcony and wall to wall. They would collide and whirl together for a moment, separate, and then backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. They were old flies, hoary Methuselahs that had survived the winter, thanks to Anthony's heating apparatus. They were as sickening to watch as the old men of the pavements.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Anthony. He was sitting astride a low bench, with his back to the light, drawing her. He wore the white jersey he worked in, and his red hair was rumpled and standing on end. At intervals he tossed his head, shaking the hair backwards and out of his eyes as a horse tosses his harness.

Hilda was busy with some work of her own, and the tinkling of her hammer sounded clearly.

"I wasn't thinking at all," said Nelly. "I was watching the flies."

At his voice thought of herself awoke and she became self-conscious. Her cheeks grew hot as she encountered his eyes.

"How your face changes!" said Anthony.

"You had just the right detached expression. Here, look up again, quickly."

He was going to enamel her for a chapel in Westonbury.

"Little children will say their prayers to you."

"I shall give them whatever they ask for, then," said Nelly.

He had drawn the golden head in a hundred postures. "So fresh," he had said to Hilda, talking about Nelly as if she were not present, "but so complete. It is not often that a child passes straight into girlhood without the clumsy sort of immaturity. When it happens it's the loveliest thing in the world."

Anthony did not often take much interest in people except in their presence. He questioned Hilda one morning, however, which was a rare thing for him to do.

"That child—what is her mother thinking about?" He was looking into the furnace and his voice was preoccupied.

"I'm afraid her mother thinks of anything but Nelly."

"A bad lot, I suppose?"

"It's hard to say. Nelly seems to admire her greatly."

"Why isn't she with her, then?"

Hilda laughed.

"I've asked her that, but she gives such a peculiar reason! She says her mother is a very beautiful woman."

"Um!" said Anthony. He was better able to estimate the meaning of that answer than Hilda.

For him the young face had a most tender appeal.

She seemed to regard life with so little criticism, with so much acceptance. Ardent Keath, coming in, had remarked it too.

"Like an angel that has never looked over the wall of Paradise."

What did the future hold for her? When she heard what Ardent Keath said she had bent her head and smiled at him with such piteous eyes. Was it for herself she was sorry? It angered Anthony to think of the beautiful face encountering horrors. He refused at last to hold such a conjecture. It became customary for him to find her in the studio every afternoon. Mrs. Hamel had asked with her habitual languor—

"What have you been busy with to-day, dear?" and when upon several days in succession he had answered briefly, "Oh, drawing Nelly Hayes," she had opened wide eyes.

"Is she a model, then?" she had inquired. Models she accepted as she accepted mutton.

"She is my model," said Anthony cheerfully. He was making a large tea. As he ate his sally-lunns he added, "By the way, I want some bright green silk to drape her with. Blue, somehow, is not her colour."

They had decided that yesterday, he and Hilda.

"I didn't know she was a model," persisted Mrs. Hamel.

"She's not," said Anthony testily. "I told you I was drawing her head."

Having learned what she wanted to know, Mrs. Hamel sent for her maid.

"Go and fetch that roll of green silk out of the chest in my dressing-room." She said to Anthony :

"I thought you were going to have those chairs covered with it." There was just a breath, a whisper of expostulation in her voice. Anthony ignored it.

"Good!" he cried when he saw the silk. "That's the very thing. When did I buy that? It was very clever of me!"

Mrs. Hamel's gaze, following him as he strode away, was almost wistful. She remembered the time in the St. John's Wood days when he had spent day after day drawing her head. That was when he made the little silver-point portrait of her that hung above his bed. It was characteristic of her: delicate, cool, a trifle distant. She sent the maid for another shawl to cover her.

"I wish the warm weather would begin," she murmured.

The green silk had a mad success in the studio.

"I'll have to paint you in that, too," said Anthony. "I haven't touched oils for years. Pity the saints always wear blue. That suits you much better."

"I expect that, for all her angelic expression, there's something unsaintly about her that spoils the harmony," suggested Steven Young, who happened to be there.

"Isn't this splendid?" said Anthony, arranging the folds. "She's like a sea-princess, or a wood-spirit."

It was Steven who discovered the right name for her. "Rapunsel," he said.

Nelly was always given pet names. She accepted "Rapunsel" just as she had accepted "Baby" from Joey Harrison.

"But I won't let anyone go climbing up my hair," she said, when they told her the story.

"Not even the King's son?" suggested Anthony. She gave him a look.

"You haven't seen witches dancing, have you, Rapunsel?" Steven asked her.

"I've seen all sorts of things, Mr. Young," replied Nelly tartly.

"And that settles you, young man," laughed Anthony.

They were a merry party in the studio.

It was inevitable that the admiration of so famous a man as Anthony should be echoed with voluble enthusiasm by those who, in their turn, admired himself. It was an easy and unservile way of paying him a compliment.

Nelly, perched above the throng of "week-enders" in her shining gown, was a centre of petting and flattery. Steven Young would come and stretch his length upon the hearthrug, watching her through half-closed, impersonal eyes, smoking innumerable cigarettes. Ardent Keath would bring up the elaborate artillery of his compliments ("Twelve-point-five," as Miss Fitch called them). Or there would be a young painter from town eager with pencil or "wash" to "have a shot" at her. Kindly women led her to view their treasures and hung beads or lace collars about her neck.

Nelly could not understand why. Young men were anxious to show her the view from the Warren or teach her to play golf. Nelly understood that better.

"What it will be when the nightingales are

singing——" said Miss Fitch, catching sight of the situation.

They did their best to spoil Nelly among them, and the women were more dangerous than the men. At men's judgment she could laugh unconcernedly. "Men are all alike; if it wasn't me it'd be somebody else." The flattery of the women made her uncomfortable. They were so fashionable, so travelled, so experienced, so accomplished, so extravagant, so sure of themselves! It was difficult for her to keep her head. She strove not to forget her shortcomings, to remember their incredibly dainty ways, their lingerie, all the brushing, and polishing, and perfuming, and reading, and exchanging of letters; the gossip, the tea-parties, the theatres, concerts, picture-shows. It puzzled her how they found time for it all. She was a savage beside them.

"They make me feel as if I lived in a cave," she said mournfully to Hilda.

"They make me feel as if I lived in a harem," said that young woman stoutly.

She was disgusted and fatigued with all the preening and strutting. She loathed the perpetual consciousness of appearance and clothes. She was filled with physical irritation by them; she could not work; she could not concentrate. The studio seemed to have exchanged its tranquil atmosphere for the trivialities of the drawing-room. She felt them to be insincere. They would talk about Art to Mr. Hamel, but they never discussed a theory among themselves. She wondered, a trifle bitterly, how much attention they would bestow upon Nelly if Mr. Hamel were not an admirer too. They were

not the sort of people to see for themselves. She damned them vigorously and moved with more deliberate ungainliness than ever.

Nelly had to grow used to being talked about and admired in detail as if she were some soulless *objet d'art*. She no longer grew self-conscious or suffered from embarrassment. There seemed to be no end to the interest they took.

One day in the studio they did up her hair to see how it would look, pulling pins from their own elaborate tresses to supply hers. Then clapping of hands, laughter and a sly—

“Why don’t you always wear it up?”

(They suspected her of being older than she was.)

“Oh, I’m holding that in reserve,” answered Nelly truthfully.

That delighted them, of course. The girl always seemed to speak “in character.”

Hilda herself began to sink into a softness of admiration. Idolatry is very infectious. She found she could love Nelly better for not criticizing her. These people, too, however little they meant what they said, seemed to summon in the girl a response that was both sweet and dignified. With them she was always on her good behaviour. There was only one frequenter of the studio, indeed, who seemed in no way to share the general enthusiasm, and that was Pandolefsky. It was not to be wondered at, for after his brief experience as an important person during the first days of Nelly’s stay, he had been dropped with completeness into oblivion. He attributed this to snobbishness on Nelly’s part, when it was simply that she did not like him. She had enjoyed “larking” with him

when there was no one preferable about, but once her preference was fixed she hardly remembered his existence. Nelly's knock became a signal for him, when the "boss" was present, to unhook his coat and, slinging it across his shoulder, to slouch to his room in the house. Hamel, and most other men, filled him with a malevolent jealousy. He despised while he envied them. He hated himself because he lacked their easy ways and assurance and their smooth hands, and at the same time he regarded them as fools. If they tried to be friendly with him and talked of his work he felt and resented their unconscious patronage. If they ignored him he resented them still more. Anthony had discovered him at the factory, or perhaps it was his talent that discovered itself. He had brought him to The Height, fed, and housed, and paid him lavishly, treated him as a comrade, praised his talent; but all the while Pandolefsky was thinking how small was his reward compared with Anthony's, how little his patience and skill counted compared with a spoken word or a few lines scrawled on a piece of paper. It certainly was disproportionate. Hamel said to him, "You will never be an artist, Pandolefsky, until you love your work." But how could he love his work when another man received all the glory of it? Anthony had brought him from the factory only that he might make better use of him, not that his talent might have wider scope. No, assuredly the debt of gratitude was not on his side. All of which was perfectly true and natural, in so far as human nature contradicts the supreme truth that it is better to give than to receive.

Unto this existence Nelly had added the final smart. She could not guess the agony of humiliation and spite that raged in Pandolefsky's breast. They all excused his surliness to one another on the ground that there was a social revolution afoot.

"It's coming gradually," said Steven Young; "the change from the old servility to the good manners of equal beings. Meanwhile the transition stage, I admit, is unpleasing."

"I don't think Pandolefsky has given much attention to the social revolution," said Hilda.

"Perhaps not. But he's a sign of the times, all the same."

"A regular revolving sky-sign," embellished Nelly in her grave sing-song.

She was sitting on a corner of the table darning the curtain that a slamming window had torn. Her slim black ankles in their silk stockings (Hilda's stockings) were crossed beneath her. Her head was bent. She was tranquil domesticity incarnate.

Anthony said, "Don't waste eyesight over that. Give it to one of the servants."

"Oh, but I like doing it. It makes me feel not quite so useless."

"Aren't you content to be sweet and beautiful? You might as well want birds to drag carts. Consider the lilies of the field," they chanted at her.

Nelly puckered her brows. "But, you see, I've a *reason* for doing this."

"What reason?"

She smiled without answering them. Had she spoken her thought she would have said, "This flower is putting out roots."

Rooted Nelly certainly was in a mysterious

fashion. It became customary for Anthony to find her in the afternoons busied with little tasks of her own imposing. Grinding glass for Hilda in a mortar, perhaps, teeth on edge, grimacing expressively, or cutting bread and butter while the kettle boiled for tea. They seemed never to take tea at Elkins's now. Nelly had introduced a spirit-lamp and had requisitioned cups from her lodging. Their chipped, discoloured ugliness reminded Anthony of midnight "spreads" at boarding-school. The whole thing somehow—it puzzled him—had a spice of adventure about it. The thick bread and butter—Nelly was invincibly clumsy with her hands—did not prevent his enjoying a second tea at the house later. He was grateful to the girls, he said, for allowing him to belong still to the fraternity of youth.

He liked to picture the studio while he was away, and Nelly a good-humoured presence in it. He never pictured it without her. Her memory rose to his eyes, full of interest in everything, altogether without egotism, importunate of kindness. He began to look forward to his returns, to the moment when, hands in pockets, whistling, he would stroll along the flagged causeway from the house, shaking back his thick hair, feeling with uplifted head the fresh air of the country upon his throat, grasping with his eyes the contrasted beauties of house and lawn and spreading landscape, rejoicing in his ownership. Sometimes he would break his journey, descending upon a gardener to know what glory was to quicken the flower-beds, to return leisurely across the lawns, and then, with a sudden spring of boyish activity, fling himself two steps at a time

up the last terrace and burst upon them in the studio like a hurricane.

"Here's the boss! Hello, Boss! Come and have some tea."

It was less like coming to his own house than being the welcomed guest in some house of friendliness. Then they would talk and laugh and exchange the news of the last few days while the kettle was boiling, and then would come Nelly's delicious voice, as she wrapped her handkerchief round the handle, "H-O-T! It is H-O-T!"

Then he would explain some new design to Hilda; or, taking a fine brush, correct some of her drawings, moving the wet glass with infinite precision on the plate.

"How you do it—" Hilda would sigh admiringly; and Nelly, unconscious that she said anything comical, would comment—

"My, you *are* a dab!"

Anthony and Hilda would laugh joyfully at her. That was how he remembered her when he was away.

When he was at home after a long day's work he would find himself listening for her footfall, for the persuasive, "May I come in?" at the wicket. He liked to shout "Come in!" and remain with his back turned a minute, seeing her in his mind before he turned to confirm the wonder of his vision. Or he would catch sight of her slipping up the garden by the little path, and know that her bright eyes, fixed on the window, already held his image. He would show no sign of seeing her, but his mouth would smile as he bent above the table.

At the week-ends it was that Nelly held her court.

Visitors were eager to be invited to have tea in the studio. Nelly's cracked cups were rarer quality than Mrs. Hamel's Coalport.

"Nelly is the child of the house," Anthony said once; "it needed a child." Somehow the phrase put a satisfactory colouring upon the affair. She was a child, a lovely, delightful child. "The child of the house" was a pleasant thing to say; kind and simple and explanatory. But the house itself, gleaming across the garden, might have been a thousand miles away. The girls seldom went near it. It watched them come and go patiently, a little reproachfully.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONFessions AND OPINIONS

OTTERBRIDGE at all times of the year is a pleasant place to stay in, and the Spring filled the girls with its own keenness and energy. In the lengthening evenings they explored the countryside, finding new paths, testing short cuts, and inventing rights of way. It was still a foreign country to Hilda after the short, much-occupied Winter days.

On the common, in one of the big, red, weather-tiled houses, lived the Spink girls, three bold orphans, whose sanity, according to Miss Fitch, "almost amounted to genius," and who Mrs. Hamel wished—"though of course they can afford to do as they please"—would get a chaperon. The young women themselves always hailed any suggestion with whoops of mockery. "Poor old thing! Can't you see her pegging after us in elastic-sided boots? Imagine her caught on a barbed wire fence by her black bombazine bustle!" They told Mrs. Hamel it was hardly fair of her to want to afflict any human being with them. ("As if she herself wasn't enough to keep a whole diocese on its best behaviour.") "Really, Mrs. Hamel, it isn't at all necessary!"

"Of course it isn't necessary," said Mrs. Hamel, impatience stirring her carefully drawled voice; "if you were the sort of girls for whom it was really

necessary, I should not be speaking to you about it——”

“In fact you wouldn’t be speaking to us at all!”

“It isn’t as if you couldn’t find a perfectly presentable person,” Mrs. Hamel had continued—she herself indeed knew of several—“all you want is some nice middle-aged woman——”

“A little softened by time and saddened by years——”

“To live at the house——”

“And carve the mutton——”

“And help you with your guests.”

“And rub us with camphorated oil when we are ill.”

“She need not go about with you at all. Her authority would be purely nominal.”

“She’d let us off on Sundays, Christmas Day, and the aforesaid national Bank Holidays, which are——”

“I am sure your dear mother——”

But there Mrs. Hamel made the fatal mistake. To “dish up” either of their dead parents to the Spink girls was an infamy and a sacrilege. It didn’t hurt the “disher” you see, but it hurt them most horribly. They told her roundly——

“Dear Mrs. Hamel, we are not out for young men, so we don’t see what propriety has to do with us. We’ve no wish to outrage anyone’s feelings, and we’re not going to, so far as we know at present, so conventions of the chaperon kind are simply absurd for us——”

“Of course if we feel our passions at any time getting beyond our control——”

"If we find our feet set untwistably upon the downward way—"

They would advertise in all the London papers and have a guardian at once.

"An *awful* one."

Meanwhile, if they felt a need for advice, "a grey head," "the wisdom that only years and experience can bring," they would come to Mrs. Hamel.

In fact they had been very nearly rude.

Hilda had made, naturally, a great augmenting of their forces. They often joined her and Nelly on the walks. They were inveterate trespassers and regarded notice-boards as simple incitements to crime.

"Come and wake the pheasants," Miss Spink would say as they climbed a fence.

Nelly was a trifle shocked by them.

They had nick-names for all the keepers. There were "Alphonso," and "Muriel," a fair young man, and "Corney-toes," whose disability was obvious, and "Gosh," who had been overheard once so to exclaim in an East wind, and several others. Nelly was more reverent than the Spink girls. She thought "Alphonso" handsome. After all a man was a man even if he were dressed in brown velveteen. "Nelly is right," they admitted, "Alphonso is not bad looking at all. In fact he is ter-uly bee-utiful." They eyed her curiously. It was her turn to shock them when they heard that she had smoked a cigarette with "Muriel" in the woods one morning.

"I begin dimly to perceive the point of some of Mrs. Hamel's arguments," the eldest Miss Spink had murmured.

"Oh nonsense, Mary Katherine," her juniors implored her. "Remember you're eighteen."

Hilda had fought on the younger side. Was it not hypocrisy of the worst sort for them to believe in the brotherhood of man, as they did, and object to a practical exposition of it? Nelly had her own notions and did not disguise them. Hilda almost argued herself into peace of mind. All the same she wished Nelly would not hang about the woods by herself in the mornings, and told her so.

"Because, after all, they aren't very interesting men, are they?" She tried to pretend that if they were interesting she would not feel any wish to condemn Nelly.

The week-ends were happier when Miss Fitch or Steven Young came down, and they played golf or made long expeditions together. Miss Fitch, however, would not always come. She found the Spinks too "bracing."

"They are so ruthlessly young and clearly think me a hundred. It's a great honour to be invited by them, but still——"

They certainly had an embarrassing way of discussing people as if the object of the discussion were not present. Nelly had a good deal of it in the studio but it was all flattery there. Here she was not so sure.

"She is the pre-Victorian woman," they would say; "she speaks before she thinks."

"She belongs to the fairy-princess tradition. Observe her hair." That was better.

"Is she good-tempered, Hilda, or does she have tantrums?"

"I get into rages sometimes, if that's what you mean," said Nelly politely.

"Of course you do. When you grow older I believe you'll be able to throw things. Plates full of eggs and bacon! Toast-racks! What a time you'll have."

"Mother did that once," said Nelly, "and she was disgusted afterwards."

"Oh, did she?" Katherine Spink was covered with confusion. "I'm most frightfully sorry for making such a stupid remark," she apologized.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Nelly. She was puzzled by them.

They had great fun when Steven Young brought down an old college friend to The Height, a sceptical, metaphysical young man with eyeglasses, who announced that he was a Strindbergian and had no illusions. They made Nelly promise to pay him a great deal of attention. She said she would do her best to "blandish" him. Steven Young was horrified.

"You dreadful young villains," he said, "to want to destroy a man's peace of mind."

"Not his peace of mind, Stevie dear," they chorused at him. "Not his peace of mind, his conceit."

The young man proved invulnerable however. He told Steven Young, "Really I don't know why women still think men can be amused by that sort of thing."

Nelly failed to be amused either.

"I like a man to *be* a man," she said

"You mean you like his face to be red and his neck to bulge above his collar?"

"You like him simple-minded and muscular. You would like him to be able to carry you twenty miles on his shoulder without panting."

"I certainly should like him not to get tired before I did," said Nelly, a trifle sulkily.

"I wonder how you will like Cousin Edward?" said the eldest Miss Spink. "Girls, how do you think she will like Teddie Armour? What do you bet he succumbs at once?"

They put on a shilling promptly.

"You'll have to say he won't, Nelly. Then you'll win four bob for certain."

*"His neck bulges above his collar, or it will in a year or two,"* they told Nelly, "and he is all that a young man, a nice young man, 'such a nice boy,' should be. There's no nasty sophistication about him. *He* hasn't had his masculinity destroyed by higher education. He's at Cambridge. We call him 'the blushing Hippocrene'—it's a way he has."

They caught Nelly by the arms and galloped wildly with her over the grass.

"You may marry him, Nellikins. We give you leave to marry him. I should love to see your meeting with our Aunt Jobiska."

What strange girls they were! Nelly knew how few of the attentive people she met would be willing to form a closer alliance with her.

"I shall be very nice to him," she said.

"As if you could be anything else!"

They discussed his approaching visit seated in conclave at the edge of the Warren. The delicate smell of pine trees and bracken stems surrounded them. They felt the Spring sunshine warm upon their faces.

"Curious!" said the eldest Miss Spink with level eyes upon the distant landscape. "I should like the world to be full of men like Teddie Armour, just because I don't like that sort of man. They might sit in rows and rows and they wouldn't worry me and I shouldn't worry them, and it wouldn't worry me that I didn't worry them."

"Oh, *stow it*," her sisters implored her.

"The sort of young man I should like to be," said another, "is the lean, eyeglassed sort, something like Stevie's friend, only unhealthier looking. I should be frightfully clever and cynical, and make love to all the girls I met."

"Ah, as long as you did that," said the others smiling, "Nelly would not be bored by you."

"Quite right," said Nelly, smiling too. She noticed that these girls seemed to discuss men as much as or even more than did the girls she had hobnobbed with for brief periods in hotels and seaside places, but they did not giggle about them nor did they recount experiences. She surmised that this was not solely because they had no experiences to recount. They did not, apparently, wish for adventures, and yet they did not show any hostility to the girls who had them. It seemed to her an extraordinary attitude, but she modelled herself unconsciously upon it. Her ingenuous flow of confidences ceased almost entirely. She had begun to be shy of the laughter she invariably provoked.

"Were you ever in love, Nelly?" they had asked her one day. Surely a leading question. She settled herself to answer with some enjoyment.

"Oh, I was."

"Who was he? Was he as lovely as 'Alphonso'?"

"He was the handsomest man I have ever seen," said Nelly. "And he'd the loveliest way of glinting his eyes at you. He was one of Mother's beaux. His name was Roderigo. He was an Italian nobleman."

They shrieked at her.

"He was, he was; of course he was. How could he have been anything else?"

"I don't know what's funny about it. He was a Roman Count."

"Did he wear white kid gloves? Did he try to abduct you? This is Grand Opera!"

"He wore white gloves at the balls of course," said Nelly, "and he *did* try to abduct me, so *there*. We had to leave Cannes because of him."

All Nelly's stories were true. That was what spoilt them.

Sometimes walking along roads beside Steven Young she talked to him about her family and her way of living.

"All this, you know," her eyes took in the woods on either side of them and Hilda and the Spink girls walking on ahead, "is so unlike anything I've done before. I don't feel it's real, somehow. I keep pretending to myself it's going on for ever."

"What are you going to do, do you know, when Hilda's time is up?"

"I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll try Panto. I had a good time in the Blackburn Panto two winters ago. But Mother didn't like it. She said I was lowering the family. But I don't see that it matters, does it, when nobody knows my name?"

"'Hayes' isn't your name then?"

"Oh, *no*," said Nelly heartily, but she did not

expand the negative into an explanation. "I had a good time in Panto. They were awfully decent to me—the Pros, I mean. I was only a kid, of course. I used to lead the marches. Maudie Maisie was our principal boy—you've seen her, haven't you? She is lovely, isn't she?"

Steven had to confess that he had never seen the lady.

"Oh, well, she isn't in London as much as she used to be, of course. Not since she got her sore leg. She showed it to me once in confidence. It simply wouldn't heal. I'd have done anything for Maudie. I liked Panto. I think I shall try it again. After all, Mother may not know anything about it. I may not hear from her."

"Does she travel about a great deal then?"

"Oh, *rather*. She's always on the move. That's for Jimmy's sake. Jimmy is my brother. I've got a photo of him somewhere I'll show you. She has to keep moving about, but she often gets tired of it. Some day she'll settle down and we'll all live quietly together, she says; but that's years off. She can't be always letting me know where she is, can she," said Nelly, combating the reproach that she felt to be in Steven's mind, "when, as she says, she often doesn't know where she'll be herself from one day to another?"

She talked on about Jimmy.

"When I came back from Dresden he remembered me all right. 'It's Dumps,' he said. That was what they called me then because I was always so depressed." She sparkled at the little sarcasm. "'It's Dumps,' he said, and came and caught right hold of me. Now that was wonderful, wasn't it,

for he hadn't seen me for two years, and he was only three when I went away? Mother wasn't best pleased when I turned up, either. There was an awful row. But I didn't care. I'd had enough of that 'superior middle class home to exchange German and English.' I wasn't going to be stranded like that again in a hurry. 'Will you walk into my parlour?'—not twice, I don't think."

"Listen," said Steven; "hear that bird? That's a yellowhammer."

She stopped obediently; but her attention was not concentrated among the gorse bushes. She insisted upon completing her confidences.

"I was a spectacle in those Dresden days. I'm not very grand now, but when I grew out of my clothes there I had to go on wearing them and wearing them till, for decency's sake, they took me to a cheap shop and fitted me out. I shall never forget those stockings—blue and white rings round them!" she laughed. "It was rather decent of them really, I suppose."

"It must have been a horrible time."

"Oh, the first six months weren't half bad. Then it was all bowing and scraping about my *schöne* Mamma; but when the remittances didn't come, and they had to clothe as well as feed me, and there seemed to be no end of it, old Frau Kopf used to come shaking her fist at me threatening blue murder to my Herr Papa. I don't blame her. It must have been beastly for her. Still, it was beastlier for me, and it wasn't my fault."

"Still, it was all right in the end, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. It was all right in the end. Frau Kopf's niece happened to go to Baden and saw

Mother walking in the gardens there. She telegraphed, and old Frau Kopf pushed my hat on; I remember how she snapped the elastic under my chin, and tore off to the station with me. Mother's astonishment was a picture. 'That's not Eleanor,' she said, 'that little object.' But Jimmy ran over and caught me round the legs. 'It's Dumps,' he said; 'it's Dumps.' Mother was furious. It was a most inconvenient time for me to come, she said; but then she always says that. She doesn't mean it." Nelly turned limpid eyes to her listener. "But wasn't it wonderful of Jimmy to remember me after two whole years? And he was only three when I went away."

No complaining, no sense of injury.

"You have seen the witches dancing, Rapunsel," thought Steven Young.

"When Aunt Colquhoun dies, you see," Nelly was telling him, "Jimmy will have the property. Then we'll be all right. Father wants to get Jimmy, if he can, of course; but we won't let him do that. He's capable of anything. He got Jimmy once, and we had terrible times. But we stole him again, thank God!—and we've been dodging with him ever since. If it wasn't for the money, Father said, he'd make an end of it and Mother could have Jimmy for good. You know he'd say Jimmy wasn't *his* son, just for spite, for he knows right well it's a lie, the blackguard." Nelly's cheeks and eyes blazed in swift excitement. "If Aunt Colquhoun knew everything she'd disinherit the whole pack of us. She always hated Mother, and she always hated me. Her side of the family is dark, you know."

Steven Young could not help smiling. He could hardly believe, he said, that hair even so yellow as Nelly's could provoke such family disaster.

"Ah, but you've never seen Mother," said Nelly.

"Is she as beautiful as you?" he asked.

"She isn't as pretty as me," said Nelly, "but I shall never be such a *fine woman*. Joey Harrison says that, and he knows."

The road before and behind them was deserted. Steven lifted the hard little hand and put a strangely reverent kiss on the back of it.

Then Edward Armour came to stay with the Spinks and Steven began to spend his week-ends in London.

## CHAPTER IX

### MRS. HAMEL—ANTHONY HAMEL—NELLY HAYES IN THOUGHT

“TONY,” said Mrs. Hamel; she was deciding what earrings to put on, and leaned peering, very intent upon her choice, above the glitter of her dressing-table. “Tony—” the voice was elaborately indifferent—“how long do you suppose that acquaintance of Hilda Concannon’s intends to stay?”

Anthony, his back to the room, was enjoying the wide view from the window.

“My dear, I wish you wouldn’t speak of the child like that.”

“Why not?” came the gentle drawl. “Why do you not want me to speak of her like that?”

“I don’t think it matters, does it, how long she intends to stay? After all, she isn’t staying with us.”

“No, of course she isn’t staying with us.”

“Surely, Erica, you don’t object to the child’s being here?”

“Object? Why should I? Why should I object, Tony?”

“I know she is in and out of the studio a great deal, but, Erica—”<sup>he turned to his wife, confidential</sup> suddenly and expansive—“I want her to be

here. Shall I tell you what I hope will happen? I hope she will marry one of our young men. I dare say she will find the right one. She attracts them all. I should feel it a splendid thing. I loathe the thought of her slipping back into the sort of life she came from. That's what is in my mind."

Mrs. Hamel was still intent upon her jewel-box.

"That's what is in my mind, too."

"Well, then——?"

His voice had a glad ring in it. He loved to be at one with his Erica.

"Do you think it quite *fair*, Tony?" She spoke gravely.

"Fair?"

"Surely we owe something to our guests?"

Anthony stared at her.

"You are thinking of Edward Armour, of course. He's such a boy, Tony. Don't you think he should have a chance to make a maturer choice? Think if *you* had married the girl you wanted when you were twenty-one! The girl out of the tobacconist's, wasn't it? Or was it the robust widow? His mother—" her voice trembled and paused for a moment—"it would grieve his mother terribly."

Anthony had not been thinking of young Armour. In fact, his thought had not yet particularized, and now that it did so, it provoked in him an involuntary irritation.

"I don't see that we are bound to take care that none of our guests hurt the feelings of any of their relations. Really, Erica, you are ridiculous. I

don't suppose Nelly would look at him." He felt quite angry.

Mrs. Hamel, screwing a big pearl to her ear, smiled contemptuously into the mirror.

"Nelly, as you call her, might do very much worse. The boy will be a baronet some day. But, as you say, it is not my business, of course. No doubt Edward is old enough to take care of himself." She left it at that. She had started a new succession of ideas, however.

Anthony found himself considering the girl in a new relationship. The vague, cloudy dreams of his generous nature were suddenly precipitated in concrete form before him. He had thought of Nelly as a secure and merry addition to his own circle, not as definitely the bride of one of his friends. The more conspicuous the worldly advantages of this match became to him, the more furiously he felt himself ranged against it.

Teddie Armour ! The thought had never entered his head. Had they been much together, then ? Was he himself the only blind onlooker ? The boy had been down for two week-ends, certainly, and he was staying with his cousins on the common now. They came in pretty often, all of them. They were a lively trio. He found he had hardly noticed the existence of the boy. He had seemed to Anthony "a nice young fellow" and "a bit of a dandy," and not worth talking to; young men so seldom were. Anthony noticed with increasing frequency that he did not like young men. Nelly as a shipping magnate's wife ! The vision could not be summoned. Surely such a civilized person as Edward Armour, so correctly accoutred, so

reared under glass, would wither in the fresh-blowing air of Nelly's indiscreetness.

"But why should I detest the thought of it?" his mind continued. "How do I know how this boy and girl appear to one another? They have, above all things, youth and vigour on their side. I must appear very old to them." (He was forty-three.) "I'm out of it. Keep remembering that!" he addressed himself. "You are old and out of it. You have had your pleasures and the ecstasies of love. Why do you go on envying the joys of other people?" Time to let these things slip past him. He sighed heavily.

Having thus for the moment adjusted himself to the undramatic rôle of audience, he began again to seek a means of meddling in the play. He pictured himself as a benign providence seeking a means to unite two starry destinies. He was going to try to like Edward Armour. "Love," he thought, "ennobles and beautifies." He was content to accept that. Nelly was already celestial. Perhaps if he tried hard enough so to think him, Teddie, spite of eyeglass, spats and wrist-watch, might appear celestial too.

In such a mood of tenderness and sentimentality he began to make Nelly an engagement-ring, a jewel that should be of lyrical beauty in itself, and not merely a symbol of happiness like the otherwise ugly things of the jewellers' windows. A wedding-ring, he thought, rightly typifies a common bond, but an engagement—the hide-and-seek, the flash or steady glow of mind and temperament—there must be something individual to reveal in that. A ring on Nelly's finger should show that someone

knew how rare a being was she, and not only that the person who gave it to her had paid fifteen or forty pounds for it.

He was eager to get to work. It would be so easy to make a thing characteristic of Nelly, and inevitably delightful. He would make a little green figure of the girl herself, he thought, a little golden-haired Rapunsel of a figure, but she should hold a lamp, a diamond, to symbolize her truth and her wise seizing of life, and all about her should twine the green of the wood, her refreshing savagery. Enamel, aquamarines, it would be a lovely little gem. Always when she drew off her glove then eyes would fasten upon it and people would wonder where she got "that." And she, too, would she not look at it often? He would never slip quite away into the dim places of memory while she wore his ring. It would always be his touch, however light, upon her hand. Teddie Armour, unpleasantly flushed with victory, came into his mind. He luxuriated for a moment in the thought of Nelly's looking at the ring with eyes of unfathomable regret. He saw her, remembering the moment when he had slipped it upon her finger (he overlooked the fact that *that* would be Teddie's part), hushing her ecstatic cries, bidding her be happy, to fill her life with all she really cared about, to grasp what she wanted and enjoy it to the full. He pictured himself and herself together: the long look she would exchange with him, and all the "might have beens" and the "little *mores*" and the "little *lesses*" that the look would convey, and then his saying, "We who are in the shadows must see you revelling in the sun. It will

set for you, too, some day." His own life, when his thoughts came dully back to it, appeared, at the moment, waste and arid to him.

April came suddenly that year with a flood of blossoms. In the woods the tall trees, caught in a net of palest green, stood becalmed amid a sea of primroses. The brown leaf-covered earth of the Warren was starred with anemones and studded with the curled fronds of the bracken. At The Height a thousand daffodils flaunted their saffron. Every crocus held the shadow of a labouring bee. The peach and plum trees, crucified against the brick walls of the terraces, shook each its shower of petals. Wave after wave of warmth and perfume swept from the south. The whole world shone, a crystal bowl brimming with beauty. Blackbirds hidden in the orchard trilled and clamoured without cease, and the flagged causeway joining house and studio became all at once wreathed and arched and intertwined with the young red leaves of the rose-stems.

Below Elkins's there was a hazel-wood where a stream wandered. Thither in the mornings, when there was no place for her at the studio and Mrs. Elkins's eye pursued her idleness with too stern an inquiry, Nelly used to go. Here among the slender shafts of the trees was an idleness that justified her own. Peace would surround her as she sat on the steep mossy bank, her hands clasping her knees, her hair covering her with a yellow shawl, sheltered from the wind, unseen, unquestioned, so she could indulge her fancies and picture in tranquillity a future that seemed ever to be smiling beneath its cloak. In this place she

felt secure from the punishment-preparing record of fate. This was the Alsatia of her dreams. Here she felt happy and confident. Good luck, she believed, would come to her. It seemed as if, through all perilous seas of misfortune, it was coming to her, drawing ever nearer with a piled-up cargo of delightful things. The day of arrival was not fixed, but it was certain—certain as death. She had no doubt of the overwhelming splendour of the tidings. Sometimes they seemed almost too close upon her. She had decided that the great thing should happen the day she was grown up. That used to be a time remote to invisibility. Now it hid excitingly round any corner.

Sometimes, when the gay company of week-enders had seemed most foreign to her, she wished a letter from her mother would be the beginning—a letter containing something more than the usual, though not, alas! regular, collection of crumpled bank-notes, stamps, and postal orders mended with gummed paper. She thought long of her mother as she sat there: of the big pale face with the crown of yellow hair, the white arms, the plump wrists and hands. Her mother always appeared in the same way in Nelly's memory: always reclining on a couch, or in a big chair with her feet upon another, always doing the same thing—threading ribbons into underclothing. With half-closed eyes the girl could see the smooth movements of the arms bare in the loose sleeves of the wrapper, and the frothy pile of nightgowns and chemises. Other parts of the scene might vary; this one never did. Sometimes she seemed to be in a drab place that smelt of dust, but oftener she

was in a big room with a curtained brass bedstead and an ottoman, two French windows, and a balcony outside, and one of her customary bouquets filling a stand in the corner. Perhaps they had once stayed together in a place like that. They had stayed in so many places. In the corner, too, would be Jimmy sitting on the floor with his bricks or a box of soldiers; Jimmy with the black head and scowling brows, their darling, their adored one, at whom the word of scorn should never be cast. He must be quite a big boy now, thought Nelly; too big to care any more for the old games, perhaps. Oh, if only her mother would send for her!

Then her thoughts turned to her father for a while and her one memory of him. That was of a bedroom, too, and she was sitting on the bed, a tiny, narrow bed under a sloping ceiling. She had to sit still lest she should bump her head, and she watched her father, with his back to her, brushing his hair before the glass. He brushed it until it shone, with two brushes at once, in what seemed a recklessly brilliant fashion. He had said to her, "I have stolen you for the day." She must have been a very little girl. Her feet on the low bed did not reach the floor. That was all she remembered.

Then she would think of her mother again. "If only she would get tired of being so beautiful and would let me play the game instead!" But her mother had said always, in those curious exclamatory monologues that took the place of conversation between her and her little girl, "I shan't give up until I must," or "I want you to have as long as

you can." Nelly felt shut out from a whole world of glamour. "You're growing up too fast, dearie," with a sigh, or a violent "Merciful God! how fast you do grow!" If only her mother would be content to step aside, to abdicate in her favour, and to say, "It is time we kept our bargain with Joey Harrison." Joey, after all, meant certainty.

Nelly, however, did not think of him for long, for this glade of hers was dedicated to pleasant thoughts. She thought instead of falling in love, its wonder and its mystery. She heard again her own voice, a piping baby voice, asking a question. It had had some intimate connection with love at the time, she knew that. Two people had been standing on the hearthrug; they were immensely tall—they towered as people did in those days. One of them she supposed now to have been her mother. They were talking up there, and all the air seemed full of a heavy sweetness. One of them had said to the other, "Your eyes are the loveliest things in the world. They are black. Now they are pale sapphires." The other had said, "Yours are golden and brown. They have little flecks in them. Now they are looking wicked. I shall cover them up." Then Nelly, from somewhere near the floor, had asked, "And what colour are my eyes?" She had never lost the faith, quickened in her there, that love is full of secrecy and heavy sweetness.

How could she expect to grasp happiness when what she desired was so remote and guarded from her? Visioning it unattainable, her breast became suddenly choked with a passion of tears, but she did not yield to them. This place was for dreams

that might never come true, but were worth dreaming all the same. She sent her thoughts round about. If she could not storm the steep ambition of her wish, she could perhaps come to it in another way.

She would think what it would be to be lifted in complete security out of the harsh uncertainties of her life. To be no longer aswing between being "flush" and being "stoney." To have a quiet husband and a cheque-book of her own. She pictured herself in a cloth dress coloured like a blackbird's egg and elaborate with pierced work and embroidery, in a pearl necklace and a hat with feathers in it, a grey fur coat, and a motor palpitating outside. She would come to leave her cards at The Height like that. Somehow it was always against her present background that she wished to reveal her glory. She caressed the idea of entering the firelit hall, perfectly in keeping with it, at ease, in harmony. She would have come, she supposed, to leave cards on Mrs. Hamel. She hugged the picture of herself. For a moment, narrowing her eyes, she speculated as to how she might definitely attain it. She passed the young men who came down at the week-ends in review.

There was Steven Young—a *dear*, but everyone said he had no money. Also she was not quite sure how he regarded her. He came and sat beside her often and looked at her oftener still, but he did not pay her compliments or give her things. He had only, when opportunity tempted, kissed the unalluring back of her hand. He might have kissed the palm. He was, in Nelly's opinion, in fact, a bit of a *prig*.

Ardent Keath, with the heavy machinery of his speeches (there was an undeniable creaking as of rust about some of them), she considered a "flat." Pandolefsky was not to be seriously thought of at all. Teddie Armour was undoubtedly "keen" on her, and she liked him, but somehow it "wouldn't wash." He was easy to talk to. He liked hearing about her theatrical experiences particularly. They attracted him more than she did herself. She felt quite "at home" with him, if such an expression, in Nelly's case, could represent feeling at ease, but—— She tried to see herself for a moment presented to his hostile "mamma," and behaving with great dignity; and then a vision rose before her of photographs of bride and bridegroom in the shiny ladies' papers. She laughed to herself. It was an alluring prospect. But Teddie Armour would no more think of proposing to her than of jumping over the moon—would he? She did not dwell upon the thought. She had a dearer dream. She pictured herself passing down a garden path trailing an exquisite white dress. (Nelly's taste in these matters was mature. Thirty seemed to her the ideal age for clothes.) She would be cutting roses, she thought, pink ones and white ones and the ones that are the colour of flesh; or, it suggested a closer ownership, pulling the withered petals off as gardeners do. A flat basket, leather gauntlets on her hands; it made her the very mistress of the place! Somewhere in the garden someone was watching her; she would come upon him, perhaps, at the next turn of the path. She knew who it was. She closed her eyes. An ecstasy that was almost a sobbing mounted in her throat.

She tried, by pressing her eyelids close together, to make his image leap to life before her. For the immeasurable fraction of a second he came; then he was gone, not to be recaptured. She was dreaming, dreaming—ah! impossible things.

She tried to make her happiness more explicit, but it vanished from her. The garden became too like the garden on the hill behind her, and she too like a trespasser stolen within it. Besides, the thought would creep in like a reproach to her that Mrs. Hamel never walked in *her* garden. The thought of that aloof little lady was, indeed, always a splash of cold water to the dreamer. She struggled with the thought; she proved it unreasonable, she vanquished it in battle. After all, she didn't envy the woman; she didn't want to rob her, to oust her, to injure her in any way. How could she help loving "Tony"? Why, even in her mind to pronounce his Christian name sent a hot flush all over her. Why shouldn't she love him? She didn't ask anything in return. She didn't expect anything. She was only thinking rapturous things. She wasn't making plans. No power on earth would keep her from loving him, anyhow; and who was Mrs. Hamel that she should play the dog in the manger? Nelly wasn't going to pretend to herself about it. "I love him, I love him, I love him," she breathed aloud. Those words were a defiance of all the world. She lifted lazy arms and stretched them with a thrilling gesture. After all, why shouldn't she love him? If he didn't love her, where was the harm? She couldn't help wanting him to love her, and pretending that he did; but if she didn't try to make him, if she

didn't try a bit? If he just thought of her as a child or as a faithful dog? A faithful dog? (Her eyes filled with tears.) Confronted by this new humbleness, the reproachful thought slid quietly away.

Nelly rose up on a wave of happiness. She took off her shoes and stockings and paddled in the stream. She made little dams of mossy stones and saw the water come pouring over them; she wriggled her pink toes in the sand. Then she picked kingcups for the table at Elkins's. She felt, as she phrased it to herself, "young again."

It was as if a fresh wind lifted her heart. To love, to pour out all she had in loving, and to ask for no return. Happiness spread wings within her.

Fortified by good resolutions, she did for the first time that afternoon what she had long wanted to do: she waited for Tony at the little iron gate. He frequently left the car there on his homecomings and walked up through the garden, instead of circling it to the main entrance.

He found Nelly at the first turn of the pathway standing quietly among flowering trees. The air was heavy with the scent of hawthorn. She was awaiting him with none of the inconsequence of chance. For a moment a prick of doubt disturbed and pleased him. Then she came to him and said with disillusioning frankness, "I saw you coming and I waited for you." It was quite simple. There was no hidden purpose in those clear eyes. Only their depths held a look he could not fathom, a soft fire, an intensity.

They walked in step together to the studio.

## CHAPTER X

### HILDA BEGINS TO GROW UP

MRS. HAMEL was not alone in her observation of the Armour Attachment. It had jumped too clearly to the experienced eyes of Miss Fitch, and from there the news had been transferred, in its successive stages, to the ears, no less experienced, of Mrs. Eckstein. There was no doubt about that at all; the question they debated was whether they might look for an engagement and a marriage, or if the whole affair was a boy and girl sweethearts, without any likelihood of a sequel. There was an interesting little symposium in Mrs. Hamel's boudoir a fortnight after Teddie's first appearance at Otterbridge, when the ladies, Miss Fitch, Mrs. Eckstein, and Mrs. Hamel were ostensibly looking at pattern-books together, but as they turned the silken leaves to the murmured "That's pretty," "I don't much care for that," "How would it look over a dark lining?" and so on, a great many things unconnected with dress-making came to be discussed as well. The physical nearness of the three heads, the isolation of the room in the sunny, spacious morning, drew them to an unguarded commentary upon the outer ring of their acquaintances, and then, by a process of gradual elimination, the circle becoming smaller and smaller, they

found themselves arrived at the heart of their discontent.

To begin with, there was a small breach of good manners to complain about—it is only the beautiful idleness of ladies like these that keeps etiquette alive—and Mrs. Eckstein complained to Miss Fitch—

“I asked your friend to dinner, Janet, and I think, as she knows me so little, she should have written after telephoning. I dare say she is busy, but it would have been more polite. I don’t feel inclined to ask her again.”

And Miss Fitch would take her little revenge by asking, “Who was the lady sitting on the floor at your party, Marie? I didn’t recollect her face.”

“My dear, I’ve no notion,” Mrs. Eckstein defended herself. “Somebody brought her. The Thring-Smythes, I think. She made herself at home, didn’t she?”

“The new manner, my children, the new manner,” sighed Mrs. Hamel. “What a pity we have to go on being polite. We cannot even tell these people what we think of them.”

“I think they must sometimes guess, dear,” comforted Miss Fitch.

“Oh, by the way,” cried Mrs. Eckstein, as one delivering good news, “I hear the Sopworth *ménage* is anything but roses, roses all the way. Bertie Egerton was walking behind them the other day, and they rowed all down the Earl’s Court Road. Bertie said it was better than a Bank Holiday, and they drowned the noise of the motor-buses. Naturally, they were too absorbed to notice *him*. It must be very entralling.”

"They do seem to make themselves unhappy," said Mrs. Hamel, trying to speak with mournful gravity, but unable to keep a smile from her lips.

"Well, if I had announced in all the papers that my divorce was the re-beginning of the golden age, I should lock my door, my dear, before I began to quarrel," said Mrs. Eckstein. "Just for propriety's sake."

"Oh, my dear Marie," cried Miss Fitch, "that is the last sake to appeal to. Don't you know the new version of Villiers de L'Isle Adam's philosophy: 'As for observing the proprieties, our servants can do that for us'?"

"Oh, Janet, don't let life make you cynical," supplicated Mrs. Hamel earnestly; but a few minutes later she was cautioning Miss Fitch against sentimentality. The conversation had closed in upon The Height itself, and the gleeful airiness as of spirits had been displaced by sensations of dislike and championship.

"It makes me exceedingly uneasy," said Mrs. Hamel. "Lady Armour will be sure to blame me if anything happens."

"But surely nothing will happen," Mrs. Eckstein said, with assurance; "the boy talks too much about it."

"What do his cousins think of it, Janet?" asked Mrs. Hamel.

"Oh, they are highly amused."

"Incomprehensible girls!"

"I wish we could persuade them to stop it," said Mrs. Hamel.

"They've asked him to stay longer specially to be near Nelly," Miss Fitch told her.

"Well, I dare say it's better than going away and writing a lot of silly letters."

"My dear Erica, you have a sensational mind."

"My dear Janet, we are dealing with a sensational person. You've heard the family history?"

"Oh that! But one isn't expected to believe a word of it, is one?"

"In any case it shows you the sort of person you have to deal with."

"Oh, I'm not going to *deal* with anyone, Erica," cried Miss Fitch. "I decline to be ferocious. And most men might do worse than marry Aphrodite Anadyomene."

"She dresses quaintly, doesn't she?" said Mrs. Eckstein, bringing them back to the patterns again. It was disappointing to find Miss Fitch a waverer.

"You oughtn't to be sentimental, Janet," Mrs. Hamel counselled her. "I don't wish to be unkind, I'm sure; but in cases like this one has to sympathize with someone, and I prefer to sympathize with my friend's son."

"Doubtless if he knew he would appreciate it," said Miss Fitch dryly. They turned to the figured *voiles*. So Nelly had become "a case," had she? The girl's bright youthfulness rose to Miss Fitch's mind and she thought, "Here we are hobnobbing over her destiny like witches round a cauldron." She smiled at Mrs. Hamel and said, "Well, I ought to write some letters. Good-bye till lunch-time."

Outside in the corridor she was strongly aware that she had joined the fell squadron of the enemy. She did not write letters. She went into the garden and stood watching the cloud-shadows pouring

across the hills, the tossing leaves, feeling the warm freshness of the sun, scenting the scattered perfumes. It came to her that Nelly was a part of all this. She could no more try to suppress and hide the girl than to order the prodigalities of Nature.

Mrs. Eckstein came presently and joined her. They talked.

"Edward Armour is a very good match, certainly."

"What do you think of him personally?"

"He's a nice boy," said Mrs. Eckstein; "it's a pity he's so young."

"That's the worst of it," said Miss Fitch; "if he proposes we'll know he's a darling, and if he's a darling it is a pity for him to be gobbled. But she *must* accept him."

"He may not be serious at all, of course. He has a small mouth signifying caution!" said Mrs. Eckstein.

"But a red jowl signifying danger," laughed Miss Fitch.

"Of course, Janet, you know I hardly think I should like, if he were my son, for him to marry Nelly."

"Ah, poor child," cried Miss Fitch, "what a wrong it is for her to have no one but herself to depend on. We've had life smoothed and made easy for us, a flight of even steps from our nurseries to our graves, and we never let go the bannisters! We have relations and friends and people who knew our fathers, and good advice and good clothes, and good husbands, too, chosen for us whenever we permit it. Imagine what it would have been like at her age if we'd had no one to say 'you may' and

'you mayn't,' and flattery going up all round one like incense. It's appalling. I wonder she has kept her head at all. I should have made thirty fools of myself. And so would you."

"I don't quite see what we can do, all the same, Janet," said Mrs. Eckstein diffidently.

"I shall let her know that someone is on her side," said Miss Fitch.

"But we don't even know which her side is," said Mrs. Eckstein.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Miss Fitch.

She determined to seek for allies.

Hilda alone was unconscious of what was happening. She knew that something was in the air, but its effect on her was simply to give her a feeling of being "out of it." She was surprised when a message reached her from Mrs. Hamel to come and take tea that afternoon. The lady had not shown much interest in her lately, and Hilda was glad that it should revive again. Mrs. Hamel was positively gushing.

"Come and sit near me," she cried, "and have a real talk. Tell me all about your work and how you are getting on, and what horrid books you are reading."

Hilda told her. When she chose to be amiable it was impossible not to like Mrs. Hamel. Presently came the question—

"And where is the beautiful Nelly? Does she still enjoy being here?"

"Oh yes, immensely! She's over at the Spinks' now, practising putting with Teddie Armour."

Mrs. Hamel put down her cup and assumed an intimately mysterious air.

"What do you think of it, Hilda?"

"Think of what, Mrs. Hamel?"

"I mean do you think Edward Armour serious about Nelly?"

"Serious? Do you mean in love with her? I've never thought about it."

She puckered her forehead. She was puzzled and a trifle vexed. She ought to have known of this before, she felt; it was somehow rather humiliating to have to be told what she should have seen for herself. All her old opinions and judgments began a shuffling readjustment in her mind.

"I haven't thought about it," she said blankly.

"Would you like to see them engaged?" suggested Mrs. Hamel.

More dazzling revelation of her own stupidity!

"Engaged?" cried Hilda. "Oh, Mrs. Hamel! Who in their senses would want to marry Teddie Armour?"

"Nearly anyone *in* their senses, I should say," said Mrs. Hamel with asperity.

"But he's so completely ordinary," protested Hilda.

"He's an exceedingly nice young fellow," said Mrs. Hamel, tight-lipped.

"But to marry him?" scoffed Hilda.

"I certainly hope she will *not* marry him," said Mrs. Hamel. "It would ruin him for life."

"It would ruin Nelly for life, too, I should think," said Hilda tiresomely.

"I wish you would use your influence with her, Hilda. She looks up to you so much," tried Mrs. Hamel.

"Oh, I don't think she does," said the provoking

young woman. Mrs. Hamel would willingly have shaken her.

On the way home Hilda suddenly laughed. What had they been quarrelling about? They were entirely in agreement about the issue. It was Mrs. Hamel's attitude towards Nelly—the "circus-rider" attitude—that had caused the trouble. Did Edward Armour want to marry Nelly? How silly it all was, and they were both so young. Besides, Nelly said she was engaged already. She was hardly going to marry two people at once, was she? It was all a muddle. Hilda stifled a feeling of resentment that grew inexplicably within her. Why had she not seen? Why had she been out of it when everyone else at The Height had been gossiping for weeks. It was with difficulty that she prevented herself from feeling aggrieved.

Meanwhile, Miss Fitch had not spent the afternoon in idleness. Ardent Keath, bidden to come and walk round the garden with her, was approached successfully. To begin with he said—

"I refuse to believe that these things are not best left to chance. Who will risk influencing the destiny of another soul?"

"You are a miserable coward," smiled Miss Fitch. "Standing still is as much an active verb as running. I'm sure more harm has been done in this world by letting things drift than by meddling."

"But what do you want me to do?" protested Ardent Keath. "You don't make human marriages by turning people loose in a paddock, more's the pity."

"More isn't the pity," said Miss Fitch, "and I'm not asking you to do anything of the kind. I only

want you not to make special plans for Nelly, not to walk with her, or ask her to play golf, or read to her, or anything for a day or so."

"I shall let Nelly—" he was a little shy with the name—"do just as she pleases." He was unpleasantly surprised to find his attentions thus marked and catalogued.

"Dear Ardent, don't you know that Nelly is the sort of girl that likes to do what other people want?"

He would not agree with her. All the same he left Nelly alone as she asked him. She had made him too self-conscious to find pleasure in anything else.

Pursuing her policy of interference, Miss Fitch next morning, while the girls were still at breakfast, knocked at the Elkinses' door. It was Sunday, and the air had the subdued sweetness of the country Sabbath. Even the bees seemed to pursue their murmurous occupations without vigour. From over the hill came the pathetic sound of distant bells.

"You darling, come in," the girls called to her. "Have some breakfast." They were fond of Miss Fitch, for she treated them as reasonable beings. She did not laugh at them and call them odd, or stop their confidences with "What strange things you girls do say!" or "Where can you have learnt to think that?" She was good company herself, and seemed to expect them to be good company too.

She settled herself in a chair and said, while they spread their marmalade, "I came down for a walk and to see you."

"You're not joining the Church party?"

"No, I've done my duty in that connection often enough this year. Mrs. Hamel has plenty of recruits to-day without me. I left them buttoning their gloves. Well, Hilda, how is everything going? I haven't seen any of your work for ever so long."

"There really hasn't been anything to show."

"Why, I thought you were doing splendidly. Mr. Hamel always speaks as if you were going to do great things."

(It was one of Miss Fitch's social laws that compliments should be repeated.)

"Does he?" said Hilda, becoming more cheerful immediately. "All the same, I seem to have stuck lately. I can't get anything finished. There's always a crowd in the studio. I flounder about, and no one has time to help me."

"Wouldn't Mr. Pandolefsky be a help if Mr. Hamel's too busy?"

"No, thank-you," said Hilda, grimacing. "I'd rather have the disease than that remedy. I expect I'm only grousing. Practice is what I want, and I'm getting that. I've a lot of things on hand, but I know I'm doing them all wrong because they're giving me so much trouble. The right way is always the easy way—isn't it?"

"Don't mind her," cried Nelly, "she's making lovely things really."

"I'm spoiling them," said Hilda obstinately, "and I'm not getting anything done. There's a silver casket in low relief set with crystals—I've put the feet on four times if I've put them on once, and they still look rickety. And the coffee spoons will simply have to be melted again, and I've spent a

week nearly on each of them." She described them. Each was to have a different bird in a branch for the handle and the bowls were to be smooth and brightly polished. But Miss Fitch had not come to Elkins's to talk about Hilda's work.

"What are your plans for to-day?" she asked generally.

"Oh, tennis, I suppose, with the Spinks."

"Isn't Edward Armour staying with them now?"

Hilda looked hard at her—had the name cropped up with purposeful irrelevance?

"Yes. Their cousin. Not a bad little beast."

"A charming boy," said Miss Fitch emphatically. "What brings him down so often?"

"I suppose he likes coming," said Nelly, smiling.

"I could suppose that for myself, dear child," said Miss Fitch, smiling too. "He'll be Sir Edward one fine day, and immensely rich. His mamma is very anxious to keep him out of mischief."

Nelly's smile widened.

Hilda wondered on which side Miss Fitch was pulling her invisible string—there seemed to be such a bunch of strings pulling at Nelly. She looked straight into Miss Fitch's eyes to indicate that she knew there was a game afoot, and said—

"I should think Master Edward well able to take care of himself." She experienced a delightful flutter, as of one delivering a pass-word. She felt as if she had been admitted into a secret society, the freemasonry of grown-up women.

"I should think so, too," said Miss Fitch. "Teddie is really a man, not a mere child." (Where was she pulling?) "I wonder if he would be able to take care of anyone else?"

"I should not care to be the experiment," pulled Hilda.

"I think you are wrong. I believe he'd be immensely kind to anyone he cared for. And he's rich and healthy, and has nice manners. I don't know what else anyone could want."

"But he's so stodgy and tame, and afraid of doing anything extraordinary."

"That's only his outside. He's probably much more interesting inside." She addressed Nelly point blank : "What do *you* think ? "

"I'm considering," said Nelly. "I like him, of course. He's taking me a walk this afternoon. He's going to show me the view from the Warren."

"The view from the Warren ?" cried Miss Fitch, with delighted raillery. "Is there some new feature in the landscape, then ? "

But seeing that Nelly did not laugh with her, she added : "Of course, places differ altogether seeing them with different people. Even the Isles of Greece as I saw them, with a number of German ladies in cloth caps and plaid shawls, lacked glamour. Some people make the grass greener and the sky bluer than others, don't they ? I don't mean the Post-Impressionists."

Nelly smiled wisely. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking.

Hilda continued the contest.

"Do you think a man's being rich a good enough reason for marrying him ?"

"I don't think it at all a bad one, if he's a nice man."

"I think a marriage of that sort simply a tragedy," said Hilda sententiously.

"For idealists like you, yes; but not for everyone."

"I thought a tragedy was a play people died in," said Nelly softly.

"It's more often a reality people live in," pounced Miss Fitch.

"But that's what I say," cried Hilda; "why do you advise, then——"

"My dear, I'm not advising. But if I were, I'd say that even a tragedy is better than nothing."

She sat silent a moment, thinking, perhaps regretting; then she rose, shook hands with them brightly, and was gone. She congratulated herself that she had let Nelly know quite plainly that someone was on her side.

After lunch, while The Height was stewing in a warm silence, broken by the sound of an occasional paper-knife cutting the pages of a novel, Miss Fitch's restless spirit impelled her to wonder what Anthony was thinking. The thought made her sit upright and roll her eyes mischievously. Where was she likely to find him? A lucky instinct sent her towards the studio. She was struck anew with the handsomeness of him. There was surely no one in the world with quite so many perfections as Anthony. No wonder all women adored him. She would adore him herself if only she could rid herself of the analytic mood, the destructive mood, the search for the weak spot. She had not found Anthony's yet. That made him persistently interesting. And he was so splendid to look at, and so warm in his greeting. Evidently he had longed for someone to listen to him, and here was the fortunate hour. He was bitter and communicative.

He had come there to get away from the chatter. He felt just then that he loathed the sight and sound of nearly everybody. They were all talking motors in there and golf—his wife's friends—very decent people, but “They regard me as a freak, you know—the lion-faced genius sort of thing”—he wasn't in the mood for making conversation—he simply wanted to talk. He confessed to a particular loathing for the sight and sound of young men. He wondered whether he had looked such a sickly fool when he was young, and whether love was always ridiculous except to the people who felt it. He complained that attainment was so much less interesting than promise, fulfilment than hope. “But that's been the lament since the beginning of the world.” And then suddenly he was speaking of Nelly, “the one person I don't have to pose to. She doesn't care whether I'm a success or a failure. Upon my soul I don't believe she knows. It's restful, Janet. All the other girls that come here sooner or later fish out an autograph-book. When I show off she just says, ‘You're a clever little chap’—what an exquisite voice she has ! ”

“And here she is,” thought Miss Fitch, “walking in a wood with Teddie Armour instead of staying in the studio with Anthony Hamel.” She lit a sympathetic cigarette. Certainly it was hard to be deserted in one's old age. She quenched the satire in her eyes.

He told her about the ring he was making.

“It's been made clear to me in a hundred ways that an engagement is inevitable. I try to like the idea of it, but I've got used to seeing her about the house, and I can't help thinking all the time how I

shall miss her. I suppose a father feels much as I when a daughter marries."

"Doubtless," said Miss Fitch.

"Erica doesn't like the idea of the marriage. It was she who told me about it. I wanted to be enthusiastic, but I can't help disliking it, too. I hate it. But old age is always envious of youth. Tell me I'm ridiculous, Janet."

She did not tell him that. She had never liked him better. She was curious to see the ring, though. "Some day, some other day, when it's finished. It's the best thing I've ever done—but then I always think that!"

"Anthony, you're a wonderful creature." She left him in gayer spirits. She herself was intensely alert. She hoped with increasing ardour that Nelly would land her baronet. On her way back to the house she amused herself with imagining the effect of the engagement upon the individual members of their circle.

She found Mrs. Hamel presiding in the drawing-room over a sedate company who seemed still to swoon under the spell of luncheon—Colonel and Mrs. Archibald, the Tolly-Keens and their daughter. Miss Fitch could not help thinking how much livelier a chatter Tony's poor disreputables would have been making. Even Mrs. Eckstein's tea-gown, brilliant as it was, could not dispel the atmospheric depression, and the cheerfullest sound in the room was a fly battering high up against the corner of a window-pane. Presently Ardent Keath came in, and after him the tea-cups. The prospect of cucumber sandwiches and maraschino cake stirred them all at last out of their lethargy.

"Where, I wonder, are Edward Armour and the Spink girls?" Mrs. Hamel inquired of the room. "I expect them to tea to-day."

"Hilda Concannon was to have played tennis with them, I think," said Miss Fitch demurely, "and there was something said about a walk, too, and the view from the Warren—oh, but it was Nelly Hayes who was to be shown that."

"I don't see why they should be late, even so," said Mrs. Hamel with annoyance. She became frankly absent-minded while the Tolly-Keens and Colonel Archibald named the places within easy reach by motor of Otterbridge.

"Charming run." "Delightful run." "Bad surface to the road." "Nasty corner at Williamstowe." . . . "The car jumped and both lamps were in fragments—simply in smithereens—very dangerous, very dangerous—of course I sacked the fella. . . ."

A great babble of voices in the hall and the Spink girls burst joyously upon them.

"We got so hot playing tennis, and then we found it was most frightfully late. We've been scrambling up the hill as fast as we could, but we had to change first—to clean ourselves. But literally, the grass was so wet . . . Oh, thank you . . . no I'll have cucumber . . . We are *so* ashamed of being late . . . Yes, I did get rather a bad one—frightfully slippery . . . They won the first and we won the last two sets. We'd have won them all, only Margery was so greedy at lunch . . . You can't play good tennis on a gorge of salmon mayonnaise, can you, Mr. Keath? . . ." And so on, and so on.

Mrs. Hamel's chill voice interrupted. "And where is your cousin Edward?"

"Oh, Teddie, I'd forgotten all about him! He was to have been here. Isn't he?"

Miss Spink looked round the room as if he might be there and have escaped observation. Then she began to laugh. "But, of course! This is *the* great day. He's showing Nelly Hayes the view from the Warren."

Again that phrase. It seemed almost a concerted plan prepared against her prejudices. Mrs. Hamel stiffened.

A new arrival sounded from the hall.

"Here's Teddie, here's Hippocrene," squeaked the youngest Miss Spink to Miss Fitch's private ear. "Watch him! See him blush!"

"Quiet, dreadful child!" said Miss Fitch.

The young man did blush, he was lamentably aware of his cousin's ruthless scrutiny. Suitable words of apology for his lateness came to his lips, however, as he greeted Mrs. Hamel; but once the stir of handshaking, introducing, accepting tea-cup and scone were over he was seen to sit on the edge of his chair in a rather miserable silence.

"Had a good walk, Teddie?" inquired Miss Margery Spink.

"Yes, thanks. Had a good game?" asked Teddie.

Miss Fitch and Mrs. Eckstein gave it up in despair and went for consolation to the library.

"He doesn't look much like a happy bridegroom, Janet," said Mrs. Eckstein.

"He does not," said Miss Fitch.

The tea-party was dispersing. Colonel and Mrs.

Archibald wanted a little walk before supper. Miss Tolly-Keen was anxious to get upstairs and see how she looked with her hair done like Mrs. Eckstein's. The Spink girls had a message for the rectory.

"Let Edward stay a little while," said Mrs. Hamel; "I want to talk to him."

Thus encouraged, Mr. and Mrs. Tolly-Keen took themselves off, too. Ardent Keath had seen a fatuous statement about the new composer, Savaloy, in the morning's paper, and was going to write a letter about it. At last Mrs. Hamel had Teddie to herself.

Half closing her glass-green eyes, she prepared for the attack.

"What have you been doing with yourself lately?" she said. "We haven't seen much of you."

"Oh, loafing about, you know. Golf and tennis and that sort of thing."

"I should think you'll be quite glad to get back to Cambridge."

"I shan't be sorry."

"When do you go?"

"Twenty-fifth."

"What have you been doing this afternoon?"

Mrs. Hamel cross-questioned unconcernedly.

"I've been for a walk. Charmingly pretty country it is down here."

"For a walk. All alone?"

Confound the woman!

"No, I wasn't alone. Miss Hayes was kind enough to come with me."

That settled her. He could hardly have bettered that. But no.

"Miss Hayes? You know her well then?"

"Pretty well, yes."

"Edward," Mrs. Hamel became appealing; "I know your mother very well. Won't you tell me?"

"There isn't anything to tell, Mrs. Hamel."

"You are not engaged to anyone?"

"She wouldn't have me."

His voice choked a little. He was very miserable.

"That is hard lines," said Mrs. Hamel, satisfaction sending a pretty flush to her cheeks. "But I can't help reminding you that you are very young. Too young, dear Edward, to think of such things."

Edward boiled. "Does she think me a baby?" He was thankful to say good-bye.

In the hall he found Miss Fitch. She hailed him cheerily.

"So she wouldn't have you?"

"How do you know?"

"I know from your face. I'm sorry."

They shook hands. "She's the sweetest—the most beautiful——"

"Don't give up hope," said Miss Fitch.

"I shall never care for anyone else," said the dejected young man.

"Oh yes, you will. You will, indeed. But, Teddie"—did all the women think they'd a right now to Christian-name him?—"don't count on all the girls refusing you." And what did she mean by that?

He returned to the Spinks.

Nelly Hayes had gone up in the general estimation. The girl aimed high. Questioned by the

inexorable Miss Fitch that evening, she lifted her head proudly.

“I am not a cradle-snatcher,” she said.

“My dear child, you are far nearer the cradle than he is.”

“Ah, no,” said Nellie gravely.

## CHAPTER XI

### WEEPING AND KISSING

EDWARD ARMOUR'S departure took for Nelly the immediate interest out of life. It gave her the feeling of dullness that the return from a holiday to familiar surroundings gives. It was greyness and rain on the heels of blue summer. His presence and the excitement his interest in her had aroused in other people had for a while dimmed that sense of the future which made all her doings seem unreal and the life that she was living less like her own existence than that of a stranger. Now there was nothing to do but to walk alone or read alone—a thing she never enjoyed—to laugh with the Spink girls when the object of laughter had become retrospective, to face Pandolefsky's scowls in the studio, and always to be unnecessary and in the way. Anthony had gone, too. That was the real misfortune of the moment, and without him the precincts of The Height seemed more than ever hostile to her. Hilda, rejoicing when a week-end was past, was filling the quiet days with a fury of work. Only Nelly's occupation was gone.

Walking sadly in the grass at the edge of the road, a solitary figure timid of the solitude, or sitting chin on hand in the hazel wood, she would

have to remind herself again and again, "This is my life; I am living now, not to-morrow or the day after that." And then the agonizing question, "*This* my life?" What was going to happen to her? Where should she go when Hilda was ready to leave Otterbridge? Would she be packing her box and going away for ever, and no memory after her, just "that's over," like a footprint on wet sand? She wanted all these people with their busy lives to have some thought of her. They all seemed solid, somehow, in a way she was not. Was it their houses that established them, she wondered, or simply their contentment? Perhaps that was it. When she had gone away would any of them ask her to come back, or talk of her at all? She thought they would not. She wished she did not think. She realized, with an aching heart, that it was nearly May, that the time toward which she had stretched eager hands a month before was upon her. Soon it would be past her, and no load of wonder with it, no miracle, no whirlwind of amazing joy. The future had just slid into the present dulled and tarnished. She wished she could have found a cave somewhere and crawled into it and put her face into her arms and slept until a gayer morning dawned. She realized how deadly her disappointment was. The achievement of Edward Armour had for the time amused her out of her essential thoughts and longings. Now there was a blankness until Anthony came back. A dread shivered into life before her that there would be nothing even then. She steadied herself to contemplate nothingness. Why had she ever expected anything else, and what was the else that

she had expected? What fantastic world had she been living in where every meeting with him filled her soul with an ecstasy of longing and her brain with a myriad crude, unrealizable hopes? Was it possible to love him so much and yet at each meeting to be no closer to him than that first time, when he had said——? She remembered all the things that he had said. Yes, it was possible. She could not accustom herself to the coldness of reality. "He doesn't love me. He doesn't love me. He will never love me," she kept repeating; but did she let her mind wander from the reiterated lament for a moment, her eyes became filled at once with visions of herself walking hand in hand with him or sleeping against his breast. "I would die for you, Tony," her brain would say instead; "I would die for you." Try as she might that image defeated any knowledge. She found herself thinking, as she had thought every day for two months past, "The next time I see him—it will happen the next time," and she pictured how it would begin, and invented words of love for him and tried to hear his voice saying them, and to feel the warmth of his arms about her shoulders. And when she found no consolation in this pretending, she would wonder if it was her own fault that she was so far unsatisfied; and she would remember some dim precept of her mother's that there was always a moment in any conversation with a man that a woman could make him want to kiss her, and she would wonder if she had been particularly stupid in her dealings with him, and she would try to remember all the talks they had had, sentence after sentence, and say to herself:

"There—if I had turned to him quickly then—if I had touched his sleeve then—" And she reminded herself that she had hardly seen him alone.

Then she would feel that she was only hoodwinking herself, and, worse still, that she was being gross, and she would cover her eyes with her hands and begin the lament again: "He doesn't love me. He will never love me," and then, small comfort to her vanity: "And I haven't tried to make him. I haven't tried and I *won't* try."

After that came the question, "But if I did try?" and she would find herself puckering her mouth to meet the empty air, and all the sweet insanities rising in her brain. And so on round and round.

"Mr. Hamel is back," Hilda said to her a few days later. "He's been up in Cumberland; he's been—"

But Nelly could not hear the rest. Her ears were deafened with the beating of her heart. Every day she had waited for that news; it seemed as if she had waited for years. The greatness of her gladness paralysed her. She sent an even little voice to suppose him in "great form." And a mouse-like "yes" to Hilda's: "I'm jolly glad he's back. The studio seems dead when he's away. He's *such* a darling." If only *her* thoughts could leap free and unashamed into words.

Fighting her longing, she did not go to the studio next day. She told herself that she dared not go. She felt too desperate, too headlong. Something she did not understand seemed bursting its bonds within her. She felt as if another disappointment would send her mad. She found herself wringing her hands and exclaiming aloud

as she walked in the woods. She had a horrible certainty that she was about to stake all she had and lose, and yet that she would not be able to help staking. It was nightmarish. She prayed that they might all float on as they were. That nothing should happen, nothing, nothing. She felt she could not grasp her joy if it were offered to her. She prayed hysterically for death.

Hilda asked her again the next day : "Aren't you coming up to the studio this afternoon ?"

"Oh, I should only be in the way. I'm in a bad mood."

"Well, come and play tennis with the Spinks, then. I'm going."

"Perhaps I will, if I feel lively. But there are four of you, anyway. Don't wait for me."

"Just as you like," said Hilda.

She was not sorry to be sometimes without her little friend.

Nelly spent the day in solitude. She hated herself for her decision. She railed at herself for it; but she made no effort to go. "I'm not going," she kept saying; "I'm going to sit quite still and let God do what He likes with me." The afternoon passed, passed, passed.

And then suddenly she had leapt in trembling eagerness to her feet. "If I hurry," she kept repeating, "if I hurry I shall be in time." She did not wait to put on a hat. She was amazed at her wild haste. She stumbled as she walked. "Don't be silly," she told herself; "you fool, don't be so silly. There's nothing to cry about. If you don't find her at the studio she'll be at the Spinks'. You can't miss her." And underneath

all the time she heard another voice warning her, warning her with an irritating cocksureness: "He won't be there. The studio will be shut. Take it calmly. He won't be there."

The afternoon was warm and golden. The Height seemed deserted. Nelly closed the little gate with an almost convulsive secrecy. She was instantly responsive to the garden's mood. Somewhere one of the lawns was being mowed. The rattle and hush of the machine came desolate as waves on a stony beach. There was no other sound. Sadness uncontrollable swept over her. A sense of failure, of opportunity offered and rejected. For the first time she reproached herself for refusing Edward Armour. There was the good thing that had been in store for her. She would never have such a chance again. That would have broken the chain of her old life for ever. That would have meant wings and glorious possibilities. Never again might she choose to be lucky. She would never have a pearl necklace now. That chance did not come twice to girls like her. What a fool she had been! Good luck had been thrown into her lap and she had not had the wit to recognize it. Oh, why had she fallen in love? "Never in love; never in love," her mother's voice came back to her; "that ruins everything." She had meant to be so different from her mother, so secure, so happy. "I've suffered and I know," came back the voice. Wasn't her mother's suffering enough for both of them? She believed, she knew, and yet she had behaved like this. She had felt the bird of fortune nestling in her hand and she had let it fly. She had let it fly and she could not

call it back again. "If only—if only—" But what was done was done. There was no changing it. Here was the end of the path and the studio door, and emptiness on the other side. Oh, she had done with hoping! That she had learned, at any rate. The door was ajar.

With what seemed a physical effort she crushed down every emotion of hope, of grief, of rapture in her breast; she became numb. Then she caught sight of Tony.

A tall man in a white jersey, standing near a stove. Why should all the heavenly choirs start singing? What glorious harmony should build itself note on note from his thick hair, his pale, determined mouth, the balance of his figure in its passive strength, the peaty smell of the rough coat on the wall, the smell of tobacco? She adored him. It seemed to her at that moment as if she pressed him, small and exquisitely tender, into the very centre of her heart.

Then she heard her own slow voice saying, as it always said, "May I come in?"

At the familiar sound he turned and let his eyes dwell on her. "So you've come at last," he said.

They stood looking at one another as if their glances had bound them together. Then he was coming very gravely to where she stood swayed towards him upon the topmost step; he had made an inarticulate sound, and his hands had caught her beneath the armpits and he had lifted her down the steps and crushed her against his body, and her ears were filled with a deafness as of rushing water, and her mouth was hurting with the insistence of his kiss.

"It has happened, it has happened, it has happened," came into her brain out of the blackness; and then she opened her eyes and found Tony standing before her, stooping a little, gripping both her hands, looking intently into her face, saying—

"Nelly, my darling, Nelly, is it all right?"

"Yes, Tony, yes, of course it is," she could scarcely articulate. She was pitifully aware that she was going to cry.

"What is it, Nelly, what is it?"

"Nothing, only—" The tears brimmed over.

"Oh, my darling—" he was holding her again—"I have made my darling cry." His mouth caught hers and stilled its quivering. "My little sweetheart that I have made so unhappy."

"Oh, Tony, I'm not unhappy. It's because I am so gla-ad." She divided the word into two quaint syllables. She was pulling out her handkerchief.

"Forgive me, my precious one, forgive me. I've been a brute to you."

"Oh, Tony, you have made me so happy." She was dabbing her eyes with her grubby ball of a handkerchief. "I'm not crying now. It was only that you startled me." She was smiling, but the tears threatened to overflow again.

"I've tired my darling; she must come and sit here and rest." He put her into the big chair and knelt beside her.

"My Nelly, can you ever, ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing, simply nothing, to forgive, Tony."

She tried to tell him. She felt a swift hatred for that word.

"I've behaved like a brute, like a devil."

She said, "If you speak like that, Tony, I shall go away and never come back again."

He put his head against her shoulder. "You must not do that," he said. "Do you love me, Nelly?"

She gave him her mouth.

It was very quiet in the studio. The level beams of the sun seemed to share the long softness and rapture.

"Do you love me, Nelly?" Would she ever tire of answering that question?

Presently the first wildness of his passion began to abate. He put repentant lips upon her hair. "Child, this ought never to have happened. I ought not to have let it happen."

She held his hand against her cheek.

"Dearest, you couldn't help it. You didn't know, my Tony."

"I could have helped it. I knew the minute I heard your voice. Do you hate me, Nelly?"

Hate him? Her sensuous arms went round his neck again.

"Do you blame me very much, Nelly?"

"Tony, if it's anyone's fault it's mine. I couldn't help wanting you, Tony."

"You angel!"

"If there's anyone to forgive it's me."

"My child, my child!" He put her smooth palms upon his eyes. "What are we to do, my Nelly?"

"Dear Tony, you are worrying."

"Oh, Nelly, I have made things hideous for you."

"You have made them—oh, my Tony, more lovely than I could have dreamed."

"But what are we to do, my beloved child, what are we to do now? I've behaved most caddishly to you."

She took her hands from his eyes and looked earnestly into them.

"Tony," she said in a husky little voice, "I shall be angry if you talk like that. What we've done can't be helped. We'll just not think about it. It'll be my secret. My lovely, wonderful secret. We'll just go on as if nothing had happened. Remember, Tony, you must keep my secret."

"Ah, but will we be able to keep it?" he murmured, leaning close upon her again.

"Yes, indeed we will. And, to begin with, I'm going to make the tea."

He let her unclasp his arms and stand up. She smiled at him with a dancing, dewy brightness.

She lit the spirit-lamp and began to get out the cups. They jingled noisily in her hands.

"Absurd!" she said, still smiling. "See how shaky my hands are!"

She was again enfolded. "Tell me you forgive me," said Tony.

"Tony, you promised——"

"No, I didn't."

She resigned herself.

"The kettle will boil over, Boss," she warned him.

"I don't care if it does. I want to talk to you. I want to ask you a thousand things. Why have you neglected me lately?"

"I haven't, Boss, I haven't, truly."

"Well, why didn't you come here yesterday and the day before? Answer, Madam."

"Isn't to-day better?"

She received her answer—

"How can a nice child like you care for an old fellow like me?"

"I don't think I am a child, Tony."

"Yes, you are."

"Well, I don't think you're an old fellow, then."

"That's better. How old *are* you, Nellikins?"

"I'm sixteen, Boss."

"I'm seventeen, then."

"You're a very big boy for your age——"

The kettle boiled furiously, and he allowed her to make the tea.

"When did you begin to care for me, Nelly?"

How delightful it was—a topic that could never be discussed too fully!

"From the first moment I saw you, Tony!"

"Why didn't you tell me, then?"

"What a silly question, Boss! When did you know you cared for me?"

"When I heard your blessed voice at the door, Nelly. And yet, do you know, darling, I think I've always loved you? You made me very miserable lately; do you know that?"

"Miserable? I?"

"Yes, you, indeed. I thought you liked someone else. Why did you make everyone think you would marry Edward Armour?"

"Oh, poor Teddie!" She gave a small laugh. "Did you feel really sorry about that?"

"I felt wretched—and I didn't know why! I

made sure you would marry him. I even made you an engagement-ring."

"You *didn't*, Boss."

"My Nelly, I did."

He found it and showed it to her. The little green gems twinkled on his palm.

"It's not quite finished. That's the finger it goes on. Now remember you are engaged to me."

Was he flirting—or had he simply forgotten? She stole a glance at him. Well, she would forget, too.

"It's the prettiest thing I've ever seen. It was lovely of you to make it for me."

"Is she like you at all, do you think? I meant her to be."

She raised her hand and kissed the tiny figure.

"She's far nicer than me," said Nelly, "because you made her."

"Nelly, you're an idolator."

"Tony, I thought we were to go on just as usual," she said, making an unwilling effort to free herself.

"So we are, darling."

He opened his arms. She slipped away to the tea-table.

"H-O-T——" she began in her old way.

That was too much. He was forced to follow her over. He stroked the yellow hair.

"May I?" he said. "I've always wanted to. Was it hateful of me?"

He knew the answer to that question. Her perfect happiness lulled and vanquished him. They would forget all this and go on as if nothing

had happened—to-morrow; but now he lifted the heavy hair and kissed the white nape of her neck.

“Tony!” she implored him.

“Beloved, I am cruel to you.”

In the end they did have tea together, Nelly sitting on a low stool at his side. Her youth had invested him. He wanted to romp and shout. The solemnity of passion was over. He behaved absurdly; he made her with eyes shut play trust and paid for with the biscuits, he drank out of her cup, he kissed her ears until she cried for mercy.

A distant clock’s chiming dropped them back to earth.

“Time for me to go,” said Nelly, steadying her voice.

“I’ll come with you.”

“Better not.”

“Perhaps better not.”

She tried to smooth her hair at the glass.

“I shall see you to-morrow?”

“To-morrow for sure.”

“Good-bye then, Nelly.”

“Good-bye, dearest Tony.”

He held her at arms’ length, surveying her beauty, before he kissed her.

“You’re sure you forgive me?”

“Not if you talk in that horrid way.”

“I haven’t spoilt everything?”

“You’ve made everything perfect.”

He held her close again. “Good-bye, my darling.”

She was going.

“I say,” She came back. “I shall be expecting you.”

"Of course you will."

"One more, then."

"The last."

The last and the last and the very last; and—"Oh, Nelly, I think I'd better keep that stupid ring for you. There's something more to be done to it—and besides——"

"Tony, I'd forgotten it. How *dreadful* of me."

She drew the tell-tale jewel from her finger.

"We'll find somewhere that you can wear it, beloved," he promised her. They separated.

And now she was flying, racing, running down the hill to Elkins's. Joy, mounting upon tumultuous wings, nearly choked her. "It has happened. It has happened." Nothing could unhappen it again. The bells pealed and rioted; the seventh heaven had been reached.

## CHAPTER XII

### INEVITABLE

NELLY awoke next morning with a puzzled feeling that she had lost something. With her second yawn she realized what it was: she had lost her longing. Beyond the utmost pinnacle of joy her mind had made for itself a vague dark background. It did not trouble to descry other peaks, other steep and dangerous places in the long vista of succeeding days. It had distinguished one possible event and set it high as a landmark. It had forgotten that any other day must follow the crowned day in the procession.

A dreamless night brought her back to a sensual reminiscence of Tony's arms, and then to that sense of something gone. The event she had longed for had happened—could she ever want anything so much again?—and it was already a memory. Anthony's love might still be before her, a foreign kingdom to explore, but the thing that had filled her thoughts, the great moment of revelation, the first kiss, were over. Her sense of emptiness almost made her forget that she was happy, and of course she was happy. Resolute humming while she dressed began to restore that impression; smiling lips, eyes opened wide in sudden sparkles, gave Hilda the same tidings of light-heartedness; and by this double deception a solid three-dimen-

sion illusion was reared up, strengthened by every fresh glance that rested on her, so like the real thing that only the most weasel-like insinuations of the mind could have detected its falsity.

"How's the world?" she cried, popping her head into Hilda's room. She felt a tremendous warmth of affection for Hilda, for Mrs. Elkins, for the kitten, for the noisy stairs. Her heart embraced all the people she had met, the woods, the skies, the month of May—everything that had helped to give her the arms of her dearest. She repeated to herself again and again, "I have got what I wanted, I have got what I wanted," until her responsive breast was aflame with triumph. She went about all day buoyed up with the knowledge of Tony's love. She believed, as she lay and gazed at the lacquer of summer leaves upon blue sky, that she did not need him ever to kiss her again. Their love was perfect and a fact without any physical expression. She could repeat the rapture of those first kisses in every sensitive fibre of her body. She meant that they should go about in the old way as if nothing had happened, that she should see him at tea-time and feel his eyes desire her, and some occult means of expression should convey that she adored him—that was all. She was too young for her ardour to need the fuel of caresses. She was radiantly contented. Her life sang in harmony with her.

All the same she felt strangely shy before her next meeting with Anthony. She felt that when he looked at her she must hide her face in her hands as children do, visibly expressing the desire to escape which agitated her soul. "How on

earth shall I ever get through it?" she kept asking herself. She was in acute fear of openly disgracing herself, of displaying an emotion contemptible and unlovely; it was the knowledge that Hilda and others would be there that finally braced her.

As she drew nearer to the studio her nervousness disappeared. She found herself looking at the flowers with an absent-minded absorption that shut away her secret alarms; the May flower-beds were a blazing profusion. She could almost have vowed herself indifferent when at last the moment for the question, "May I come in?" had arrived.

There it all was. Hilda in her blue workman's blouse, the afternoon sun, the pale walls, the smell of matting, the big chair with its cushions smooth and unrumpled, and Tony at his table in the window. Yesterday might have been only a dream. She drew a quick breath.

"How goes it?" she called lightly, to let him know that all was well with her.

He lifted his head and drew the corners of his mouth back slightly, as if he perceived a something grimly humorous in the situation, before he said, "Come along."

She realized intensely as she stood on the step that she wanted him to lift her down, as he had done yesterday. Then she perceived that he was intent above his table, just as she, a few minutes before, had been intent above the flower-beds. He was steadyng himself.

That sign of weakness similar to her own filled her with a wave of tenderness. She began to talk gaily and excitedly; she brought forward a

troop of unusual slang expressions, she made the silliest jokes with a feeling of absolute heroism.

After a moment or two Anthony's voice joined in the laughter. The difficult corner was past.

Over the teacups Nelly regaled them with snatches of ancient street songs. They felt themselves to be golden company. Hilda was enchanted with Nelly again. This was the old quality that she expected in her, the irresponsible quality that had charmed in the appalling Bloomsbury days when any ordinary mortal would have been looking glum. Then it had been the difficulty of her situation that had conjured a bold defiance; now, had Hilda known it, the cascades of laughter were for difficulty again. Anthony's uproarious laugh kept ringing out. He had dreaded this hour. He was amazed and delighted at the ease of it.

"O Jerusalem, they made me one of the family !  
O Jerusalem, let them do as they like with me !"

sang Nelly. Life seemed clear as water.

Next day brought visitors to The Height and not a glimpse of Tony. For Sunday Hilda had arranged a picnic on the river with the Spink girls. They spent the whole day strolling beneath the willows, the evening playing bridge, while Nelly lay in the bow and let the cold stream flow against her wrist. She found the fever she had fancied stilled rising in her veins again. She was shaken with gusts of anger. Would she never see Anthony for a second alone? How could he waste his time with all those hateful people? Her sense of bafflement translated itself for the moment into anger with him. She began to pretend that he had only been playing with her. She repeated savagely

many times, "Well, *I* don't care either, then." She wanted to bite herself in her passion. Yet none of the other girls guessed the blank rage that was tearing her. She was outwardly listless and dreamy. She showed no tremor of her irritation.

Monday, and the thought of seeing him, brought back the old seethe of longing, and as she entered the studio her brows drew together in a sullen scowl. Why didn't he break down all the barriers that restrained them? It was for him to do it. The impossibility of even a private word was a strain almost past enduring. He was strangely quiet working at his table. She went and stood beside him. She had an unaccountable impulse to yell obscene abuse into his ear. Hilda crossed the studio to lift a copper plate out of the cleaning bowl. At that instant Nelly's hand was gripped with a strength that nearly forced a shriek from her, and Tony's voice gasped, "Nell!" She realized then that he was enduring the same torments as herself. It comforted her while her body became still more restless. They both looked with morose eyes at the unconscious Hilda. It was strange that she, so capable, brisk and pleasant, should be turning their love into a devouring flame.

Chance showed no likelihood of favouring them. Anthony's time at The Height had been spent in too definite a routine for him to vary his occupations without causing remark. Nelly, though wandering over half the countryside every morning, must linger in the woods alone; and the evenings which he might have spent nominally hard at work in the studio, Nelly must spend in company with

Hilda at Elkins's as she had hitherto done. Accident had thrown them into one another's arms; accident now determined to keep them apart. By the irony of fate they were forced to keep their good resolution, and as circumstances evolved the triumph of the conventional, Anthony, his conscience no longer troubling him, was borne in utter helplessness into the current of his passion. Virtue was ruthlessly its own reward. They were denied even the glow of righteousness. Only a dry fever in the veins, heavy eyes, sleepless nights. Clear consciences were plainly not enough to promote sleep. It was only when she had rolled sheet and blanket into a smooth arm about her neck and pressed her cheek against the smooth cheek of the pillow that Nelly could find rest.

The studio was maddeningly full of people. The Spinks and Hilda, Mrs. Hamel and her guests, seemed to have entered on a conspiracy to thwart the lovers. Loads of acquaintances began to arrive for an afternoon even in the middle of the week: "The weather was so tempting." Nelly and Anthony began to feel as if they had no spot to lay their heads.

At last, one afternoon when only Hilda and herself were there, Tony brought out a folio of his old designs and drawings. "Here, look at this and keep quiet," he said to Nelly almost roughly. "Hilda and I are going on with our work."

Nelly, subdued, took the big black case and opened it upon her knees and began to look at it. Anthony's voice had hurt her so much that the tears were pricking her eyes. She turned over the loose pages: drawings of houses, drawings of

jewellery, drawings of flowers, of birds, of women, of dresses, and then in the middle a piece of paper on which was written something that began, "Sweetheart, I must see you . . ." and that ended, "Burn this."

The ancient device, old as civilization itself, of the *billet doux* had inevitably evolved itself. From that time, save for flowered satin, Nelly became one of those tiny Figures that slyly grace the pillared background of Watteau's pictures. Her life was as wildly exciting as hide-and-seek all over the house, it was exhausting, it was exhilarating, it was frightening, it was beautiful, and it was very ugly indeed. It was the folk-song hidden in the complicated splendour of full orchestration; it was a flame-coloured thread plaited invisibly among the multitudinous strands of other lives. It sent her about with downward smiles and sidelong glances alight and brilliant with mischief. It made her sing to herself as she walked in the woods; it made the hours brush past as lightly as a swallow's wing. It made the company of her fellows the only solitude. It was mad and it was sad and it was bad; it brought about a full half of its well-deserved tragedy, and it ended in being ridiculous; but while it lasted——!

Anthony had made no complex plan. He had to be away for three days to direct some alterations in a house the other side of the next county. If Nelly could contrive to get to Stenling Park gate (about two miles out of Otterbridge) by half-past ten they could have a day together. There were so many things he wanted to say to her. Nelly could contrive it. Her contribution to the conspiracy was to

get Mrs. Elkins to give her some cold meat and bread and butter to take with her, as she "intended to eat her lunch up in the Warren or somewhere"—that would prevent conspicuously missing a meal. It was a wonderful May morning when she started from the house. She accompanied Hilda a bit of the way uphill to The Height. She had left herself a bare allowance of time, yet somehow she found herself dawdling and chattering and deferring the moment when she must leave Hilda and plunge into the green arcades of the wood. Her heart was beating rapidly, her knees felt as if she were wading in water.

At last, with a sharp effort, she managed to say, "Well, so long, Hilda. I won't come any further. See you at tea-time." And, having crossed a narrow plank and scrambled through a gap in the hedge, the woods enfolded her.

Once there she set off to make up for lost time. The little path jogged shatteringly downward, the warm, bitter smell as of walnuts rose at every step from the crushed leaves and mire beneath her feet, the patches of sunlight as she ran through them streamed over her in liquid motion.

Presently she emerged from the trees on the further side of Otterbridge. The path was now raised, hugging the side of the road. Coarse grasses caked with dust bordered it. Yellow coltsfoot, bright-eye and red clover struggled through them. She walked swiftly, feeling intensely hot. At Baron's Corner she turned southward into a lane; its violet-scented, leafy walls made a dark cavern after the dusty glare of the high road. She wondered anxiously if she was late. She glanced

behind for the sight of the motor. The lane began to go uphill and the hedges dwindled.

An old red wall topped with grey stone succeeded them on the left. A sharp turn brought her in sight of the gates. The road was empty. She walked quite slowly. A sparrow flew down into her path and up over the wall again. She noticed the red lettex-box sunk in the wall. "Collections 11.30 a.m. and 5.15 p.m.," she read in passing. The little square with the time of the next collection on it had been broken away. One could have imagined robins building in that letter-box. Little grass-like moss-flowers poked out of the crannies of the wall. A chestnut tree had made all the ground beneath it red with fallen blossoms. She wished she had a watch, she began to wish she had not come at all, and then somewhere in the lane she heard the purr of an approaching car. She did not cease walking, nor did she turn her head. This might be the doctor, or Mr. Grew, the publican from Churchfield. If it was Anthony she would show him how discreet she was. The car pulled up beside her.

"Good girl," said Anthony. "Hop in quickly." Only by his voice could she have recognized him. He was wearing the most abundant motor "goggles" she had ever seen. "I've brought a coat for you and a bonnet," he told her. "Let's put you into them."

He buttoned the coat beneath her chin. "Better wear the veil down." Nelly disappeared behind the mole-grey chiffon. Not till the brakes were released and the car slid forward had he a sense of security. Then his spirits rose.

The wind flowed past them, smooth against the throat as velvet. The familiar surroundings disappeared in an intoxicating, audacious swoop. Anthony took off his glasses, Nelly flung back her veil. She did not question him as to their destination. He spoke to her at last, glancing down into her eyes—

“Don’t you want to know where I am taking you?”

Nelly shook her head. “I don’t care a bit,” she assured him.

“Nelly—” he half sighed, half smiled—“you’re a hopeless character.”

They pulled up at last at the little inn at Chidderwick, where no one went since coaching days, thirty miles from home—and, for the matter of that, from everywhere. There they had dinner in the deserted dining-room, while an aged waiter polished innumerable glasses on a sideboard by the door, and later they walked in the woods behind the inn and saw great white and golden clouds streaming up above the spires of Linbury.

“How wonderful it is!” said Tony. “How wonderful!”

He was speaking, he thought of the clouds, but he put his arms round her and held her to his breast.

They did not speak of love that day; they spoke only of the small things they could see: a late primrose, an early briar, the roofs below them among apple trees, an ascending lark—it was almost as if their kisses were less the objective than the accompaniment of the journey.

When it was time to go back Nelly remembered

her packet of lunch that she had not eaten. She did not know what to do with it. She had all poor people's horror of the unluckiness of throwing away food—a superstition that deserves, indeed, the honour of a faith. She was absurdly worried about it, and would not "just throw it into the hedge" the car tore past, as Tony advised. Grinding up the steep High Street of Linbury they perceived a blind beggar sitting against the wall of the Market House, a blind beggar black clad and cowled like a leper.

"Here's your man," said Tony, stopping the car.

Nelly leapt out. "Could you eat a few cold beef sandwiches, poor man?" she addressed the shrouded figure, and, without waiting for an answer, popped the parcel into his lap and ran back to the car. His dismal blessing followed her. It was the only one that her excursions with Tony received. They passed him on their way whenever they could.

Tony brought her back to Stoddington, west of Otterbridge, on the Brighton road, by mid-afternoon.

"I wish I could take you to the door, but, you see—"

"Of course, of course, Tony." She scrambled out of the cloak and bonnet and put on her own soft hat.

"Good-bye, my darling. Sure you've enjoyed it?" The brown fingers lingered on her own. "I shall have to go like the devil now if I'm to get to Chichester by daylight."

"Be careful, Tony."

His white teeth flashed at her. The motor was reversed, the car swung slowly round, a backward wave of the sunburnt hand, and he was tearing from her. She stood looking after him till he was nearly out of sight; not quite—that would have been unlucky. She felt unaccountably crestfallen as she walked back to Elkins's.

That was the first of many expeditions. Sometimes they met at Stenling Park, sometimes outside Stoddington. Sometimes they lunched beside a shallow lake in sunny woods, sometimes under the sun-bleached downs at Arundel, once at Brighton—but Nelly's beauty and shabbiness were too astounding there—oftenest at the little inn at Chidderwick; but wherever they might make the turning-point of the journey its happiness for Nelly was ever the same and was reached at that moment when, the gooseberry pie or rhubarb pie being eaten, Anthony let his level eyes dwell upon her, and sent his strong fingers in pursuit of hers across the table-cloth, and drew her slowly, in her feigned reluctance, round the table and into the imprisoning ardour of his arms. Held against his knee, her head pressed into the accepting cavity of his shoulder, an hour passed, like the indrawing of a single breath.

## CHAPTER XIII

### TRIVIALITIES

MEANWHILE life at The Height displayed its usual unruffled surface, there was as yet no swift eddy, no snag, no floating weed, no darkening indication of danger. May deepened to June, and the land lay basking. Even Mrs. Hamel went into the garden sometimes, and might be seen there languidly promenading on her maid's arm, or sitting in a lounge chair in the shadow of the cedar trees with a pile of uncut novels and books of reminiscences, preferably by persons of title, on a table at her side. She gazed with a detached admiration that could never be described as enjoyment at the heavy flowers of the standard roses, at the carnations and stocks and delphiniums. She wore a shady hat of gracious fashion, and drew long gloves upon her hands before going out.

Sometimes she invited the girls to come and talk to her, or rather to let her talk to them. They were a distinctly tanned and freckled pair, and Erica could not restrain a feeling of satisfaction at the contrast of their sunburnt skins to her own white one. Beside them she appeared as might a china shepherdess strayed into the company of Dryads. She enjoyed having little discussions with Hilda

and demolishing the girl's sweeping assertions with her own maturer knowledge. Mrs. Hamel liked to illustrate in her own person the common idea of eternal femininity. When Hilda clapped wings for independence, Mrs. Hamel expressed her need to be taken care of; when Hilda waved the flag for courage of one's own opinions, Mrs. Hamel hoped she personally would always believe that there existed wiser heads than her own; when Hilda hurled the guttings of medical pamphlets at her, Mrs. Hamel made a strategic movement into cover with the remark that there were some things she preferred not to think about.

"You can't get to grips with her," Hilda would complain, "she'll tell you politely you don't know what you are taking about, and when you throw a fact at her she lifts a great shield of decency and hides behind that."

"She's very clever, Hilda," said Nelly solemnly.

"Oh, if you call that cleverness—but after all, what does the woman know about anything? She's only been married and lain on a sofa for the rest of her life."

"She knows a good deal, all the same," said Nelly, "she knows what she wants and she gets it. That's my notion of cleverness," said Nelly.

She resented Mrs. Hamel's presence in the garden. The big house and all the elaborations it contained she could grant her, but the garden and the fragrant winds that blew there she regarded as her own. Mrs. Hamel would be coming to the studio next.

"Say what you will, Hilda," Mrs. Hamel was saying, "women do not as a whole excel in any art.

There isn't a single department in life that man cannot beat them in."

"It's just as true to say there isn't a single department that some women don't beat some men in."

"My dear girl, what nonsense—look at music, look at painting!"

"You seem to agree with the people who think every man is a mixture of Beethoven and Michael Angelo!"

"I don't think anything so silly, but you can't deny the facts!"

"I don't deny them. I think women are as capable of appreciating genius as men. But to use the artistic genius of certain men as reason for giving every booby paying house-rent the vote, seems to be about as relevant as the question, 'Should sawdust merchants dance quadrilles?' I don't depend on Helen of Troy and Ninon de l'Enclos for *my* case."

"I have a book here which proves quite ably—if you read it I don't think you could deny the ability—that if women were excluded from every profession except physical motherhood, the world would get on very well without them."

"I can imagine the world getting on very well without half the paraphernalia of a modern state if it comes to that. I can imagine it without lawyers, or police, or cat's-meat men, or soldiers very well."

"Oh, of course, if you want to abolish the army like the peace at any price crowd—"

Nelly let the argument drone on above her head. Her thoughts were filled with one thing only and

the level distance, the wavering smoke ribbons, the faint rattle of hidden carts, the young robin watching them with bright eye from the handle of a lawn roller, made for it a subservient harmony.

"An army in times of peace is a plague spot, in times of war an infamy," cried Hilda, with noisy rhetoric.

"Please don't abuse my relations," protested Mrs. Hamel. "The army is a thing you must allow me to know something about. It's a splendid thing for a people, it keeps them from getting flabby. Every man in the country should be compelled to serve in it."

"Do you call a workman hammering the gigantic side of a liner flabby? Do you call the men who build skyscrapers flabby? I don't think they're in danger of flabbiness, they're much more in danger of breaking their necks."

"I'm not talking about the lower classes, Hilda. I mean the sort of men who come here. Conscription would do them a world of good. Janet Fitch says the only first-hand knowledge any of them have of the sterner side of life is the discomfort of their starched collars, and some of them don't even wear those."

"Still—even for *their* moral welfare—I don't think we'd really enjoy the wreck and horror of a war."

"The war is inevitable. It must come," cried Mrs. Hamel. "I was hearing about it from Sir Galton Strong only last Sunday. He says Germany must find an outlet for her surplus population. Germany won't go on being hemmed in. She's increasing by a million a year."

"Well, the thing for Germany to do is simply to stop having a surplus population. Once the Hausfrau gets a trifle civilized——"

"Really, Hilda, the things you young girls talk about!"

"Well, it wouldn't be much fun arguing if you had to rule out half the things you know as improper. Thinking would be like fighting with your hands cuffed."

"Well, I think the right thing for the world is that the population should go on increasing."

"With wars to keep it within bounds?"

"With wars to keep it within bounds."

"If you hadn't something of that sort, I suppose," said Nelly, "we'd soon not have room to sit down."

They laughed a little.

Hilda persisted: "I think your method is an encouragement of useless suffering."

"Is suffering ever useless?"

"Of course it is. And degrading too. That's why I'm a feminist. I regard feminism as a crusade against suffering."

"My dear Hilda, there is no such thing as feminism. It is a purely economic movement. I was told the other day by a man who really *knows* about these things——" And so on.

Mrs. Hamel believed herself to have an oracular knowledge that could contradict the obvious truths of existence. Sir Galton Strong, or "someone in the education office," or "a man who is considered to have a very brilliant mind indeed," were her authorities, and once assured of a sound source she never questioned the quality of the water.

Nelly had an impression of these people as very tall and still more solemn beings, whose sense of their own wisdom fell like a blight upon merriment.

On the talk would go, and presently Nelly would catch a phrase.

“But surely you are not in favour of free love?”

“I think free is a good adjective to prefix to most things—but it wants defining.”

“Well, I’m sure I don’t want anyone else’s husband, and I don’t want anyone else to have mine !”

“But they are bound to want him, some of them, he is so charming !”

Mrs. Hamel smiled. “My dear, we are not *animals*.”

Nelly watched two white butterflies that hid and sought one another in the tulip bed dancing and dodging and flickering together, and then one left behind and the other winging solitary away with only its small shadow following below it on the grass.

So the weeks went, a little talk, some tennis, a long walk or two, a sitting in the studio, supper on Sunday at The Height and music. The new faces were pleasantly similar in their variety. Very smart girls and less smart “well-connected” girls making friends for an afternoon with Nelly in the studio, amused by her, interested, and then suddenly holding her at arm’s length, as it were, while they discussed their balls and whether it was not as well to perfume the hair, and if so what with—“There’s a delightful little new shop at the back of Dover Street—” or they agreed that violet powder was not the thing for a “gehl.” “When one’s married, of course,” but the great thing for

a "gehl" was to be fresh. And they decided that men always liked hair done "low" better than "on top." "Of course, you will wear yours low when you put it up," they said to Nelly. And she learnt that pale blue ribbons were really the only tolerable ones for underclothing—pink, perhaps, was possible; but mixed colours, mauve or orange, vulgarity. "It's no use trying for individuality over that sort of thing." Originality in most things, to be sure, though amusing for a while in other people, was really bad form in oneself.

Nelly was humbled before their omniscience. They in turn felt it to be an immense success if they contrived to get her society for Sunday afternoon at The Height. "Will you let us walk with you to-morrow?" they would ask, were they fortunate enough to be included in the Saturday "drawing-room" of the studio. Nelly's engagements were not of the rigid kind that enforced her to make refusals, and she would set off resignedly in her old blue cotton dress between Miss Meale-Maugham and Miss Cynthia de C. Latham in their flowered and striped muslins, not a little puzzled at the ardour in pursuing her and exhilaration in having captured her that they made no effort to conceal. She did not know how largely the rumour of her presence was whispered at The Height. How a newcomer having said, "Oh, shall we be let look at Mr. Hamel's studio?" The answer would be given with pursed lips: "That depends on many things—you know there's a sort of fairy princess down there."

"A fairy princess! How very exciting! Do please tell me about her——"

So was Nelly's reputation made, and many were the disappointed maidens with bitter hearts and drooping mouths who spent Saturday afternoon reading in the library or walking in mutual boredom round the gardens. The men and the older people did not become aware of this key-stone of social success, the agitating gossip did not reach them, but the younger dames were ready to shed tears should inclusion in the studio be withheld from them. To share the fairy princess's company in exclusive splendour for the Sunday afternoon as well was giddiest triumph. They would return from these excursions full of disjointed hints as to the beauty and brilliance of the mysterious stranger.

"She isn't like anyone you've seen before, is she?" they would agree before the baffled curiosity of the envious throng. "There's what Mr. Keath calls—what was it Mr. Keath called it?—oh, yes, that's it—a witchcraft about her. He says she's under a spell." "And Mr. Young said—(Steven had returned again)—that it was they that were under the spell, not she." "They all call her Rapunsel." "She's going on the stage." "Mr. Hamel thinks her the loveliest person he has ever seen. He told Mamma so." "Is she very lovely?" from one of the curious ones. "Well, she is extremely pretty, nobody could deny that—she is very striking, and her hair is simply marvellous. Yes—I suppose one *would* call her beautiful . . . she's certainly very attractive. She has a way of speaking. . . . Oh, I *couldn't* call her the loveliest person I've ever *seen*. . . . Really Millicent Hardwicke is *much* better looking . . . but she certainly has a fascination about her. You can't help

watching her all the time to see what she will do next. . . ." Then they would discuss whether it is better to be charming or fascinating and which is which.

Nelly did not enjoy the walks as much as they did. It gave her almost a sensation of having been trapped when the warm, slim young arms slid affectionately into her own. She became conscious of the extreme delicacy of the shoes that were advanced and hidden in rhythmic nimbleness on either side of her common black-laced ones. The light, high-pitched voices embarrassed her.

"When are you coming out?" they always asked — a question that may be called a "facer" for a girl who has never been "in."

They would confide their petty love-affairs to her and try to hear of hers in return. Failing that, for Nelly was now gently inscrutable on that subject, they would get her opinion on how you could tell if a man was flirting or if he meant what he said. "Ah, sure, nobody means what they say," Nelly would disillusion them, she who on principle always deducted seventy per cent. from compliments. Then they would make her heart ache planning frocks that they thought would suit her. "Why don't you go to *Selma*, she really isn't dear? She'll make up your own stuff between the seasons too, and use any old evening gown for a lining quite *wonderfully*." Or "what sort of furs do you wear, Nelly? You oughtn't to wear shaggy ones while your hair is still down. . . . You'd look *lovely* in ermine." Nelly did not doubt that. By her second experience of these newly-grown-up damsels she had learnt to lie a little, it was dull

for them and humiliating for herself to have to keep repeating, "I haven't any furs," "I haven't any old evening dresses." She would give them the glinted name of her Aunt Colquhoun, and a tantalizingly shallow insight into her family history. In the end she would have promised to write to them and would only just have avoided, they remembering in time to check themselves, invitations to come and see them in town in the winter. Mr. and Mrs. Fannan-Wake indeed did ask her, but when she mentioned them to one of these Olympians her satisfaction was soon dispelled by the murmur with raised eyebrows, "The Fannan-Wakes? They moved from Wardour Street to Belgrave Square in a lifetime, didn't they?"

It was all the same, whether she walked with Miss Meale-Maugham or Miss C. de C. Latham, Miss Anne Paley, or Miss Jocasta Adams. Sooner or later in the afternoon would come a request: "Do ask Mr. Hamel to design a dress for me for the Albert Hall ball on the 10th," or "Father wants Mr. Hamel to design a music-room at Owlswell for us—do try to persuade him," or "Wouldn't a dance be fun here, Nelly? It's a shame to waste that great room at The Height. Suggest it to Mr. Hamel and get him to ask us all down. *Do. . .*" There was no limit to their importunities. Sometimes Nelly did as she was asked, oftener she didn't. She knew quite well her influence with Anthony, and it was too precious a possession for her to risk straining it. He asked her opinion about everything, not because he thought her judgment valuable, but because he believed that she was right. It was a superstition.

He consulted her when other men would toss a penny. She was his oracle, his little green-clad familiar spirit, and she was not disposed somehow to interest him too keenly in the affairs of these other girls who to her were so wonderful. She could not control an involuntary jealousy that sprang within her sometimes as she descended the hill with Hilda, knowing him in his own house and the door closed to her. She and Hilda were only workaday friends of all up there. The weekends brought the real people. She did not know how the memory of her presence lingered with him like a perfume. She longed to be with him at different hours of the day. To see him at breakfast time, and lunch and dinner, to accept all the small conventional attentions from him, to be part of his ordinary life. Her breasts felt burnt as with fire when from a vantage ground on the Warren she saw a new bevy of daintily dressed women troop out of the house for a walk or tennis, or to sit chatting among the garden flowers. She often left Elkinses' now as early as Hilda (she did not wish their sharp-eyed landlady to remark anything unusual in those other special excursions of hers) and from the Warren watched all day the comings and goings. She did not know if it more tormented or consoled her to catch sight of Anthony's minute figure as he came and went. Sometimes he would walk in to lunch with Hilda, but oftener a troop of people surrounded him half-way and bore him indoors among them. Full length she lay upon the pine-needles, a female Gulliver plagued by these remote unconscious Lilliputians.

## CHAPTER XIV

### PANDOLEFSKY ON THE SEX QUESTION

ANTHONY HAMEL knew very well that he had created what could easily become an entirely disgusting situation. It was one thing to delight in the constant company of a charming young girl, and another to seek every opportunity to kiss her. There was no great difference in the spirit of the thing perhaps, but it was one of those cases in which the letter giveth life. It was impossible for him not to be ashamed of himself. Brought up as he had been in a tradition of seemliness, which is at least the most gracious aspect of hypocrisy, it was the nearness in actual space of Erica and Nelly that filled him, in the absence of the latter, with a shuddering contempt for himself. Had he met the girl on his travels, under Southern stars or similar provocation, he would not have suffered such humiliation at his own behaviour. He had, he assured himself, none of the conventional moral objections, and it was solely the dislike of hurting his Erica's feelings, of making her think he was not sincerely fond of her (which he was), that set him at such pains to deceive her. To have had one life with Nelly fifty miles away, and another, his real life, the life that he himself and everybody else admired and respected, at The Height would have been endurable, in fact exceedingly enjoyable,

but to have to lead two lives at once, to be in a perpetual perspiration of deceit, to have to change expression and voice like an actor, not for a few hours, but at any moment throughout the day, was both nauseating and tiresome. Only Nelly's arms about his neck could shut away that feeling, and even then it inspired his tongue to ask her again and again, "Are you sure you don't hate me, Nelly? Are you sure you have forgiven me?" (She hated those questions, though she did not understand them, judging his love for her by her love for him, they were absurd, but instinct told her they were ill-omened for her. He never asked them till they were saying good-bye.) There was an honourable thing to do, a noble thing, the thing that Erica had always deprecated in his friends; but—he found himself clinging to the fact that Erica had always deprecated it. He could not bear the thought of grieving Erica, that punctual soul in the frail body; he must not grieve her. He clung to that duty, letting it fill his mind to the exclusion of other duties. He could be frank with himself about certain things, but he was too kindly a man to care much for the cruelty of complete truth. His mind was a sky of windy weather, now gleaming clear, now totally obscured; and before all things there was the temptation of his passion and Nelly's lulling encouragement of it. How it would end, how he wanted it to end, were not in his imagination. Like Nelly herself, he was living in the happiness of the present, careless of what the future might hold. He had a notion that it contained for them both a way out.

Sometimes he found himself wishing that the

girl was more fastidious. That she herself would say to him, "This situation is impossible, Tony. I can't live like this," and that she would go away. But the vision of his days without her hurt too keenly. He would find himself, instead, picturing the pursuit and reunion with her, and the pleasure of that scene would set him longing for her voice at the studio door again. And when she came, what desire was left him to be rid of her? She felt no degradation in his love, for her there was none. She trusted him entirely. If he had said, "You must come away with me," she would have come without the slightest hesitation. Her perfect faith in him swept him with tenderness. Her great eyes, full of an unquestioning devotion, revealed her very soul at his mercy. And if her soul was his, her body was his also, beautiful to stroke and hold. He could never content himself with the simple knowledge that she loved him. He seized every moment that they were alone—and such moments were few and scattered—to kiss and caress her. Sometimes it was thanks only to Hilda's lack of observation that her unpractised youth did not betray them. He put too fierce a strain upon her powers of simulation. She felt that all the world must read his hand's mark on the long smoothness of her hair or upon the roundness of her breast. Once when, in the wholly deliberate exuberance of his homecoming, he had found her and Hilda alone in the studio, and had caught her by the elbows and tried to jump her into the air, her sharp "Don't do that!" seemed to him to cry their secret to the winds. He was better at deception than she was. It astonished her, the ease with which he glided from

intimacy to ordinariness at a breath. While she would be shaken and flushed with the ecstasy of him, he would be taking the temperature of the furnace or searching in the press for some design or jewel. It saddened her a little that he should have himself so well under control, but she only made it into another attribute for marvelling. How frightful it would be, she reminded herself, if their secret was found out! It was for her sake that they must have secrecy; Anthony had told her that. Yet she should not care, she knew, if what they did was known to everybody. She was both too proud and too humble. She loved him so much that she did not care what happened to her so long as he had pleasure. That it was that kept her on her guard. And surely he did not love her less because he did not want all the world to know it?

It was very difficult always to remember. Sometimes when she had been but a moment released from the strong castle of his arms she found herself on the point of calling him "Tony" in public, and when, remembering in time, she called him "Mr. Hamel," her voice had so much scared amusement in it that even Hilda noticed that there was something strange. She could not imagine what it was, but she felt suddenly anxious and worried about the girl. Suppose she angered Mr. Hamel with this ill-concealed impertinence and he requested Hilda to bring her to the studio no more? Only a few days later her fears seemed realized when she learnt that Nelly was to confine her presence in the studio solely to tea-time, and at the same time it struck her that there was just a perceptible coolness in Mr. Hamel's treatment of the girl. He no longer

hailed her extravagantly when she came in, nor did he even ask her to pose for him. She mentioned her idea to Miss Fitch.

"I'm afraid Mr. Hamel isn't as interested in Nelly as he used to be."

"Oho!" said Miss Fitch, whisking wide open her eyes; "and what, now, makes you think that?"

Hilda told her.

"M'm!" said the clever one. She determined to give the matter her closest attention.

It was not lack of interest, however, that made Anthony exclude Nelly from the studio. Since he had admitted his passion for her he found that in her presence he could not work. It required a constant watchfulness to keep him from stretching out a hand for hers as he sat at his table, or from kissing her soft arm as she passed near him. She was so sweet and wonderful an addition to his life. He revelled in the thought of her, he exulted and was ravished; but for that very reason he had to deny himself her company. He could not let his work go to the wall.

About this time anyone at The Height with an ear finely attuned to the note of the house, as country people judge the state of mind of the bees by listening to the sound of the beehive, would have heard the constant repetition of a single phrase; would have heard it spoken in company and in the unquiet questionings of minds, spoken sharply, and querulously, and anxiously, and satirically, and soothingly (with a particular and conscious dwelling on this last sedative manner). The phrase was: "Of course, she is quite a child."

The talk was started by a rash impulse of

Anthony's. In Linbury one day Nelly noticed in a shop a set of remarkably fine old china, gay, resplendent teacups laden with strange Chinese flowers and butterflies—early work, as it turned out, of the elder Wedgwood. On his way back a few days later he bought the set as a surprise for Nelly. Hilda found him unpacking it when she arrived at the studio next morning. "What, more china!" she cried. "What an eye you have for it, Boss! But where *do* you mean to put it?" "We'll use it out here," said Anthony; "it will be nicer than those old chipped cups, won't it?" Nelly was in loud raptures when they were shown to her. "Oh, Boss, how lovely of you! Did you really get them for me?" She pouted a little when, for Hilda's benefit, he repeated that he was tired of "those old chipped cups." It seemed so ungrateful to the old ones, and they had had such good times with the help of them. She was very proud when, at tea-time, she heard the astonished and admiring chorus of their guests, and Anthony's "Caught sight of them in Linbury; thought they were too good to miss." So far, so good. Steven Young it was who led her to disaster.

"They are little marvels, Tony," he said; "but I'm not sure that I don't like Nelly's old ones better. I have a sentimental attachment to them." Nelly waited for Tony, and as he did not speak she said softly, "These are mine, too." There was a moment of remarkable silence, followed by an equally remarkable outburst of talk: "How lovely for you!" "How wonderfully appropriate for you!" "They'd make the fortune of a collector!" and a speech that seemed to crawl among the others

like a stoat: "What a pity we haven't all Mr. Hamels to give us tea-sets!" The beastliness of that smote Nelly. Her miserable eyes sought Anthony's downcast ones. She was suddenly aware that many different pairs of eyes were meeting. She made a nervous, convulsive movement, and the cup she was holding fell to the ground. There was a rush to pick up the fragments. It seemed to her at that moment as if all her little world was falling to pieces. She stood flushing above the bending backs. The sly voice said again—it belonged to a deadly smart girl with a cigarette stuck to her lower lip: "You'll have to be given another set soon, if that's the way you treat them."

Nelly was plunged in shame. She felt as if she had been beaten. In their anxiety to avoid harping on the accident it seemed as if they made the conversation intentionally skirt her. None of the women addressed to her another direct remark. She found herself on the outskirts of the group, quite unnoticed. She might have been put in the corner. She was dazed at the unanimity of it. It was the mob spirit in miniature. She longed to break away from them and get out into the air and throw herself upon the grass and cry. She felt in this unaccustomed neglect the inspiration of Anthony's disfavour.

"I cannot bear it," she thought; "I cannot bear it. I must get away."

"I wish Mother would write to me," she said quaveringly to Hilda that evening as they walked down the hill to Elkins's. "I'm doing no good here."

"Ah, don't say that," Hilda implored her.

"What's wrong? I did mean you to be so happy with me."

"Darling Hilda, I've never been so happy in my life. I can't tell you how happy I've been."

"It was a pity about the cup, but don't be worried. I'm sure Mr. Hamel won't be vexed for long."

"Ah, it isn't only that!" sighed Nelly.

There were a good many discreet conversations at The Height that evening, beginning with a significant "Well, my dear, what do you think of it?" and ending with the usual "Of course, he regards her as a child." Only the deadly smart girl, with a whisky-and-soda on her bedroom mantelpiece, volunteered quite boldly to give them her opinion, and was surprised at the way the conversation fluttered from the subject without her offer having been accepted. She could not understand all this delicacy being shown in regard to so entrancing a creature as Nelly. "If you're as pretty as that you have to be careful. It's one of the penalties. Thank God, I'm such a rum-lookin' guy no one ever thinks of slandering me," she confided to a friend. She did not understand their queer diffidence.

It certainly was curious that, with so strong a feeling of having been unable to help noticing in the air, no one was anxious to give tongue to the surmises. It was the possible solitariness of the suspicions that gave a tinge of vulgarity to such thoughts. No one was eager to be the first to acknowledge them. "What a coarse, finite mind I have!" Miss Fitch would reproach herself, plucking impatiently at the rose-leaves as she walked

along the narrow causeway. "What a crude imagination! Why can't I be content with what I see? Why must I want to go interpreting?" And Mrs. Arden, very sweet to Nelly as a balance for her unworthy doubts, would think: "After all, Tony Hamel can't be judged like other men. He's such an unconscious creature." And they would say to one another: "How boyish he always is! He will never learn ordinary dull, grown-up, cautious ways." And that would bring them back to the childishness of Nelly, and they would shy a bit at the recurrence of the word, and vaguely hope that "Hilda's little friend" did not fancy herself in love with him.

Each was determined not to be the first to mention what "anyone with a nasty mind might possibly suspect, my dear." Suspicion of any kind made one positively ill, and The Height was such a pleasant place for wearing summer muslins. There was a hum of half-suppressed utterance in the air.

The knowledge that people were talking was conveyed to the objects of the discussion in two distinct and thoroughly unpleasant ways. To Anthony it happened in this fashion: An old acquaintance of his at the club where Anthony stayed when he was in town became confidential in the smoking-room.

"I saw your car at Chidderwick the other day, old man," he began the story; "at least, I'd be almost ready to swear it was yours—long grey fellow, six-cylinder. I suppose your chauffeur ain't in the habit of taking joy-rides?"

"Oh, they all do," said Anthony unconcernedly.

"Well, he's a deucedly lucky chap, then," said Gregory Howard amiably. "Picked up the absolutely handsomest little slip of a girl I've seen this very long time. Wish you'd ask him to introduce me."

"I'll try to remember to mention it," said Anthony imperturbably.

"Do; and there's another thing you might mention at the same time, and that is for her to wear her veil down, or she'll be getting into trouble with her school-ma'am. And if he's wise he'll take to wearing his goggles, too."

"I'll tell him," said Anthony; "thanks for the tip, old man."

So it was known.

Plainly their excursions would have to stop. If by that one chance in a thousand (no one in his senses went to Chidderwick) they had been seen, other people might see them, too. Nelly was too magnificently conspicuous.

"God!" he thought; "what ought I to do? What do I want to do?"

Nelly received her hint in a far less genial fashion, and from the person last in the world that she would have wished to have the power to give it. For it came from Pandolefsky. There had been for a long time something sinister in the way he looked at her; a gloating and cruel enjoyment. He knew, she was sure, how uneasy he was making her, and how a laugh on his face would quench the laughter in hers. She had been stupid in her treatment of him. When she reviewed her months at Otterbridge she wished she had behaved more cleverly. She tormented herself with thinking of

it. She had been two swift in ignoring him when, Anthony first absorbed her interest. If only she had not "fooled round" with the creature in the beginning—if only she had taken Hilda's advice! It was too easy to rouse a brute like that; it was, indeed, more of a success not to rouse him. But then she had not known how all the men would like her, and Pandolefsky even was better than no one. She did wish, though, that she had not let him kiss her. It did give him a vantage-ground for sneers. It was housemaidish. She ought to have known better. Of course, she had meant nothing by it. It was just to pass the time. Why couldn't he have forgotten it? She very nearly had, until his leering face began to disturb her peace. Did he know, did he not know? He did not leave her long in uncertainty. There was a big crowd in the studio that moment he chose—Ardent Keath, Stevie, Miss Fitch, everybody—and before they had come she had had five minutes alone with Anthony; in fact, while Hilda was fetching them. She and Anthony had forgotten Pandolefsky, and, indeed, everything in the world but themselves, but they fancied they had eluded his little hot eyes, when his shadow made silent announcement of his presence at the door. He said he had left something behind—his pipe, his penknife—she could not remember which. Perhaps he had simply been spying on them. It was most likely. On his heels came all the others, and instead of leaving in sullen haste, as usual, he stood about listening to the conversation. His malignant expression kept her apprehensive eyes upon his face. Then she knew what he was waiting for.

Anthony paused near him, and she saw Pandolefsky lift his hand and make a motion as of drawing a thread from Anthony's sleeve. Then, looking very steadily at her, he moved across the room and stood a moment near her to make sure that she saw what he wound upon his fingers. It was a long, bright hair. When he saw that she had seen, he went away. Yes, Pandolefsky had his own way of telling a thing. She was haunted now by the question of what he meant to do with his knowledge; scared and worried, as he intended her to be. Almost she went to him herself and asked him, only the humiliation of acknowledging her cowardice was too deep for her. She could not do that. She must suffer in uncertainty the insolence and menace of his smile. She was unable when away from him to forget her anxiety and pursue her hereditary habit of trusting to luck. A few days later one of Anthony's notes came to increase her despondency—

“My sweet girl, there must be no more motoring. I have heard something that makes it impossible—at least for the present. Darling, you know how badly it hurts, this separation from you, and how I hate having to increase it. Dear, dear child, don't be unhappy. I tell myself again and again that I have only brought you wretchedness, and yet when I close my eyes I see your smiling mouth and hear your laughter. I shall find a way to see you—soon, *soon*. Good-bye. Think of me sometimes. I kiss your hands.”

She was sitting in the little glade with the letter in her hand when Pandolefsky came on her. She had taken off her shoes and stockings, and her bare

feet hung dejectedly in the water. She was wondering what had become of her happiness, grieving at the blackness of her days, the heaviness of her spirit. When he came behind her she turned without any suddenness. There was nothing just then that could add to her dreariness, nothing to be surprised or startled at. She accepted his presence as part of her misfortune, and her mind made no comment on him as he stood surveying her with one hand resting on an ash-tree shaft, shoulders hunched, head thrust forward, leering, satirical. Round his neck a scarf of silk printed in many colours had been twisted; his serge trousers, of too vivid a dark blue, were dusty at the knees; his shirt was stained with sweat; his coat was slung across his shoulder. Her eyes took in the details as if he were a painted image, not a live meddler with her destiny. She did not attempt to speak to him. There seemed nothing just then to say. Presently she was aware that the image was smiling. Its eyes were directed to her feet. She realized with a shock that some action was expected of her; that they were not just to stay passively looking at one another and then to go separate ways. The silence became a quarrel. She drew back from the edge of the stream and tried to cover her bare feet with her skirts. Decidedly she was at a disadvantage. She looked round for her shoes and stockings, but they were farther up the bank. She flushed with annoyance. He enjoyed her discomfiture.

“Waiting for anybody?” he asked at last.

“No,” she replied, giving him the shortest possible answer.

"Then I shan't be interrupting," he said. He took his hand from the tree and came heavily down the bank. "Having a paddle, eh?"

"I'm just going home," said Nelly briefly.

"Not going just when I come? That would be unkind! I've been wanting a talk with you for quite a long while. This is what I call a Heaven-sent opportunity." He picked up her shoes and surveyed them jauntily.

"Give me my shoes, please," said Nelly.

"I'll put them on for you," said Pandolefsky.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Nelly.

"Allow me," said Pandolefsky, moving in front of her; "the right foot, please."

"Will you go away?" She tucked her feet beneath her.

"What's all the fuss about?" asked Pandolefsky, with pretended innocence. "My modesty won't be offended. I'm not one of the nobs. What are you trying to hide them for? Thought they were one of your strong points. You're never anxious to hide any of your strong points, Miss Hayes, are you? You're not very clever at hiding anything, are you?"

Nelly did not answer. She was cold with anger and dread.

"Why won't you let me put them on? You usen't to be so particular. You're not very, very particular now, are you?"

Still silence.

"You needn't talk to me if you don't want to," he went on. "I can't make you speak or anything else, can I? I haven't got the pass-word. I haven't got carroty hair and a motor-car. I'm just

a low brute of a servant, that's all I am. 'Yes, Miss.' 'Thank you, Miss.' 'Pleasant weather we're 'aving, Miss.' I'm going to sit beside you snug and comfortable." He sat down beside her as he spoke. "Now we're cosy, aren't we? Quite like old times. Remember that morning in the orchard? You know, I enjoyed that." Her silence was beginning to irritate him.

"You never speak to me up there now, do you?" He jerked his head towards the house. "Wouldn't demean yourself, would you? Got swelled head, have you?" He passed one of his unclean hands over her hair. "Is it painful?"

"Don't touch me," cried Nelly.

He stroked her hair again. "I'll touch you as much as I please," he said. "You know you like it really. Nice hair, this—" he pulled it sharply—"and gen-u-ine."

Nelly sprang to her feet, but his hold on her skirt drew her down again.

"Let me go."

"I won't."

"Let me go. How dare you?"

"Now don't you start any rough-and-tumbles with me, or you'll get more than you bargained for. You wouldn't be the first I've made yelp."

"What is it you want?" Nelly panted. "Why are you treating me like this?"

"Oh ho! now we're coming to it. Now we're going to be sweetly reasonable. Thought I'd make you chuck your swanking." He swung her opposite to him, holding both her arms tightly above the elbows. Eye to eye he said, "I'm

treating you like this because I know the proper way to treat you—see?"

"I don't understand."

"Oh yes, you do, Miss Nice."

"I do not."

"I know what's on between you and a certain person—see? I know your pretty ways when you think no one's looking. Oh, you're a beautiful pair!"

"You're wrong," gasped Nelly; "you're quite wrong."

"I'm not an idiot; I know what I've seen."

"It isn't what you think it is."

"What do I think it is, Miss Snow-white Innocence? Give it a name."

"I don't know what you think, and I don't care either," cried Nelly, stung to fury. "Let me go."

"Shut up." His grip tightened. "Listen to me. What's your game?" She was dumb, so he shook her lightly.

"What are you doing it for? What do you reckon to make out of it? Presents? A dear little flat in town—eh? Speak up: what are you hoping for?"

"I refuse to understand you."

"Well, I'll have to speak plainer, then. If there's any fun going I mean to share it. The Boss won't want you all the time. He's not the only one knows what he wants when he sees it. I don't mean to be left out. You needn't make a fuss. You didn't mind larking around with me when you first came down. You were keen enough on me then."

"I was never keen on you." She loathed his mean expressions.

“You were.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Liar !” He pinched her arms. “You kissed me.”

“That was a joke”—from drooping lips.

“Well it’s not the sort of joke young ladies are supposed to make. Didn’t your mother ever tell you that ?”

“I thought you were so kind and so amusing. I didn’t think you took it seriously,” murmured Nelly. She was prepared to wheedle him now. There was nothing else for it.

“Thought me harmless, did you ? Well, what do you think now ?”

“I think it’s very nasty of you to behave like this. I didn’t expect it of you, Mr. Pandolefsky. I’m sure you’ll be ashamed of yourself by to-morrow.”

“Ashamed ! I like that. You to talk of shame, after hugging and kissing a married man under his wife’s windows ! Look here—” he stopped his banter—“I’m as good as he is. I’m just as much a man. I guess you’ll have as much fun with me, and more. And I won’t go back on you. Straight ! You’re a little peach, Nelly, and I’m going to eat you.”

His moist hands slid over her, heedless of the sick horror in her face.

“What do you say—Nelly ? You’ll be my little jo, eh ?”

Her voice came to her at last, difficult, scarcely audible—

“I’d die rather.”

“What do you mean ? You’re not going to be

disagreeable, are you? You know, if you are, I may be disagreeable too."

His hands fell to his sides.

"I don't care what you do."

"Oh, so you don't care what I do. We'll see about that by and by. Maybe your fine friends won't care what I do, either; or what *you* do, either? What do you think? And the Boss will so enjoy it! 'My love against the world,' he'll say, won't he?"

He rose to his feet, shouldering his coat.

"Well, young Nelly, you've made a nice fool of yourself." He was twisted with jealousy and malevolence. "You'll find yourself in the wrong boat, my lady, one day soon. There's no accounting for tastes, but—coo, lord—" he forced a laugh—"fancy being taken with old Tony Hamel! That's the best thing I've heard this long time. That's what I call funny." He slapped his leg. "Excuse me laughing. I thought the old man was getting past that sort of thing. Must have had about enough of it by now, I should think. You don't suppose that you're the only one? Why, there isn't a woman comes near the place without making eyes at him. Mr. Anthony Hamel, the perfect gentleman! Have a jolly time, and then 'good-bye, little girlie'!"

His outpouring of words was exciting him.

"'Good-bye, little girlie,'" he chanted. "'Sorry I can't invite you home to tea. Be happy. Enjoy yourself. Think of me kindly sometimes. Sorry I can't ask you in; but the missus might object.' You'll be outside and the door shut tight. You'll be in the gutter. That's your proper place. Up

and down the pavement—” he made a few steps, swaying his hips—“in the filthy muck. ‘Good-evening, Charlie—’” he mimicked a pert feminine voice—“and if I saw you then I wouldn’t have you,” he cried, “not for fourpence.”

He cleared his throat noisily and spat into the stream, then clambered up the bank and strode out of sight. Nelly sat quite still when he was gone. Her heart was thumping, her eyes were very dark. Presently she put on her shoes and stockings and went home. She never went to that place again.

## CHAPTER XV

### AND ACQUAINTED WITH GRIEF

ANTHONY's instinct was for the blindest flight. No girl betrayed by her lover could be more eager to avoid his fellows' eyes than he was. It was not reproach he feared so much as inquiry, inquiry that awakes in mankind that blind folly of confession from which spring all the embarrassments and disillusionments of life. He wanted to get away, and he could not permit himself to behave like a skunk. He would not own that he was tired of Nelly, or that, being satisfied, he had no further use for her. No, what appeared to him was that hitherto he had been stupid, he had not perceived the number and tediousness of the consequences of his actions. He had set people talking, he had behaved with atrocious lack of consideration, and now the best reparation he could make was to silence those tongues as soon as possible. The simplest method of silencing them was to get out of earshot.

Opportunity, after its custom, presented itself. He received within a few days of one another invitations to exhibit at the International Society in Boston, to lecture on craftsmanship at some American University and to design the country house of Elisha T. Coonmanrigs, Junior, in the Adirondacks. He had been tentatively fostering the offshoot of his American connection for some time

and behold it blossoming. Here was a chance of escape that was no mere excuse. It was necessary for him to go to America. Violently necessary. If he stayed he would be stimulating gossip indeed. He could only stay by an unusually marked preference for this country, and moreover he might blight his American offshoot for ever. The dollar is not accustomed to receiving snubs.

He was not more than four minutes making up his mind. Things must sort themselves as best they could, he was going away, away, away. No boy at the edge of school holidays could have embraced freedom more eagerly. Meanwhile he was distractedly busy. Too busy for retrospection or recollection or introspection or any uncomfortable thing. He flung himself upon the neglected pile of his work like an enthusiastic wave. It was glorious to lose himself again in the element where he was master. How he could work when he went at it! He shut himself into his studio night and day. His meals were sent out to him on trays. He was too vehemently absorbed in his work even to wince at the oddness of the alliance he was making—the alliance of desire and duty.

Nelly knew nothing of these sudden plans. She did not trouble to suspect that her time of drifting was over. But the days were tame. The world was a top that had ceased singing.

Mrs. Hamel it was who extinguished the sun. She asked the girls to tea with her the day that Anthony told her his decision. She anticipated a tiny pleasure.

"He'll be going for the whole autumn. Probably for the winter. When he goes I shall seek a change

of air in some civilized place, and workmen will take possession of this house. It's rather bothersome being wife to a man of genius. No sooner do I get used to a room than it's all made different. I never know what my house is like. I'm continually getting surprises, usually pleasant ones, I admit——” the cool voice went on. She spoke as casually as if it were no news at all, but a fact so long accepted as to have ceased to be interesting—as a grandmother says to a child: “Before you were born, my dear.”

Blackness was upon the earth. The tea-table and the balustrade disappeared from Nelly's eyes. She could hear nothing but her own heart making a dull tolling in her ears. She realized that she must not faint. She had not fainted. She heard Hilda asking intrepidly: “When does he go?”

A cold dawn seemed to break over the garden again.

“About the middle of July. He's going first into the mountains. The country house has to be something very special. Mrs. Elisha Coonmanrigs, Junior—I beg her pardon—Mrs. Elisha T. Coonmanrigs, Junior, wants a villa impregnated with the life juice of nature. I learnt that phrase by heart. Americans amuse me.”

“I say, it does make me feel blank,” said Hilda, “his going.”

“Oh, but he'll come back again,” said Mrs. Hamel, smiling.

“Of course, he'll do that,” said Hilda, “it was myself I was thinking about. I can't tell you what these months with him have been to me.”

“I know he has enjoyed having you.”

"I hoped my apprenticeship wasn't going to end so soon, but it's been the time of my life, anyway."

"You must come and stay with us when we are at home again."

"Thank you most awfully. I shall love to."

They talked of other things.

Tony going away. It was the stroke of a bludgeon. Even at the cost of pain she must break through the numbness that was settling upon her mind. She must think, she must think. No, she mustn't think or she would scream. She must get away somewhere that she could scream. She remembered a description Tony had given in the studio once of a scene he had happened on in Sicily. A troop train was departing and a girl was being left behind, and she had flung herself on the ground and raved and torn her clothes and kicked her boots off; but when the train was out of sight she had risen and pinned up her hair and put her boots on again and walked away. How they had all laughed at the description of that scene! O God, God, God, how was she to endure being alive without him? Should she just put her boots on, like the Sicilian girl, and walk away? She felt so dazed as she walked down the hill that she could almost believe she was doing it.

All night she lay in alternating torments of hope and of despair. "It isn't true. He would have told me. It can't be true." Hope would make her start to a sitting posture in her bed. "It is true. Be quiet, you fool, it is certain, certain." Despair was the less painful of the two. It did not set her straining to get to him, to clasp his knees, to implore him never to leave her. It pressed like a

stone, but it did not drive iron hooks into the body, tearing it asunder. "To see him. If only I could see him. If only he would tell me it was true himself." Truth, however ugly, passing his lips would bring consolation. Partly the thought of nearness to him, partly had she named it, the desire for that small boldness on his part, inspired her. She knew, she had always known, he was timid of publicity, but gentlemen, real gentlemen, were like that.

"They don't care for larky hats," her mother had said, "they don't like you to be as conspicuous as a Catherine wheel, not really."

She did not mind his being afraid of other people, but that he should be afraid of her——

Next day brought no alleviation of her misery. With Hilda came word that the studio was too full for either of them. "The Boss is in great form, I've never seen him in such spirits. Says he's got to fit a year's work into a week. He's a wonder. Says he'll have some odds and ends for me to do presently."

"Did he say anything," asked Nelly from her abyss, "about his going away?"

"Oh, he'd only talk nonsense. 'For they've been to the sea and the terrible Zone and the hills of the Chankly Bore.' And he said he ought to have gone a month ago. I'm glad he didn't."

"Going, really going. Wake up and think about it, you fool," Nelly implored herself, as if she were addressing a sleeping oaf. But no thoughts could mend it. No words of hers could reach him. No tears of hers could move him. Worse, she had none. She felt like a third person

helplessly witnessing a crime. It was like the nightmare in which the child is run over—or worse still, in which the train goes on without one. At night from her window in the valley she could see the green glare of the studio window streaming out uncurtained upon the summer leaves, making them look as if they were clipped from tin. Up there, mysterious as an alchemy, her destiny was being fashioned. Someone was going to hurt her, and she would not be able to prevent it. Sometimes his shadow crossed the light. Sometimes a door slammed and Pandolefsky came out on a message. It was something to fix her eyes there in adoration, it was a bright light and a holy place, but it was as unconcerned with her, too, as the moon.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A QUARREL

THE work, however, was getting done. Unfortunately for Anthony's peace it could not last for ever. It was impossible to slip away without even saying good-bye, and he had not meant to do that, had he? Or—had he? Well, that was not his intention now. It would be very pleasant to say good-bye, to hold Nelly's hands and look into Nelly's eyes again. Besides, all sorts of people were coming for farewells, it would seem strange to them if the green nymph wasn't there. That wasn't the point. It didn't matter what other people thought. He wished his brain wouldn't twist out such contemptible ideas. Oh, let him, for any sake, stop worrying about things. He stretched his great arms until the muscles cracked.

"When are you girls coming to make tea for me?" he asked Hilda.

"Whenever you've time to be bothered with us, Boss."

"We must have a farewell brew."

Hilda conveyed the message.

So paradise was open to Nelly again. She made the journey thither on the last day of June, an afternoon of yellow sunlight singing with bees. The garden borders were woven thick with flowers,

red and blue, purple and tawny, wide open, bleaching in the heat. The terraces were veiled with perfume. It seemed to her as if her happiness was about to burst into flame again; but when she reached the studio it was a flame not of joy but of anger that burnt up in her heart. Anthony was surrounded with women. Their clatter and determined laughter filled the air. They had been disgorged by a motor in time for lunch at The Height. Anthony was in high spirits, noisy, talkative, displaying the contents of the jewel presses, scattering precious stones to delighted cries, just as he had done for her a few months before. He was too absorbed to have more than a nod for her. She stood in the arch of the doorway expectant, exquisitely posed, unnoticed, frozen with disappointment, while the Misses Ahearn-Wylie praised and criticized and exclaimed and re-exclaimed, and were as much without shyness as a dog at dinner time.

"Here's your mascot, Marigold, sapphires for your birth month. September, isn't it? . . . Why is it wonderful for me to have remembered? Don't I remember every word you ever said? It would be a wonder really if I forgot. Why, look here!" with pretended surprise, "they just match her eyes. My dear Marigold, you don't need any more sapphires." He was again at the cupboard.

"Here are the ones for a woman with red hair." Nelly saw the aquamarines spread broadcast. "Are these your favourites?" The question he had put to her was now addressed to Olivia Wylie—"the stock question," her mind taunted him—"Just the thing for a green-eyed enchantress, a rather wicked

enchantress of thirty. No, you mustn't wear any till you are thirty: thirty to thirty-five will be your great period."

The red-haired girl protruded her large teeth among her freckles.

"And pearls for Lydia." (Would he never finish making an idiot of himself?) "Beautiful cool pearls from the depths of the sea. This child should wear ear-rings. She will have immense distinction when she grows up." The "child," a lanky and anæmic dowager of eighteen, flushed to the square bridge of her nose. "I'm not sure that you oughtn't to wear turquoise," he turned to the eldest, who was the pretty one, of the three again. "You could wear them. Most women make them look like bits of blue china." Miss Marigold expressed a preference for translucent stones. "Yes, yes," Anthony agreed with her, "they are more beautiful. Turquoise just miss the jewel quality—how did you know that?" He fixed his embarrassing eyes upon hers. "The wisdom of you young people is staggering. At your age I should have been better able to philosophize on the qualities of nougat and caramel than on subtle things like gems." Miss Wylie felt she had said something profoundly wise. Anthony was swimming in the sound of his own voice. "Gems! There is always something mysterious about them, some echo of strange powers of enchantment. Turquoise, oddly enough, is the one most endowed with magical qualities—yet it seems such a daylight stone. Perhaps that is why it is a protection against evil. There is so little unexpectedness about it. No night or twilight. Certainly in a fine

gold setting it can have great freshness and charm, but it always seems to me the stone for luncheon parties and gaiety and the haunts of man."

"Goodness, what a frivolous person you must think me!"

"Not frivolous," said Anthony, with a disconcerting gravity. (He had forgotten that he had said she should wear them.) "Frank merriment and sweetness is never frivolous! Why, you all laugh like elves! If I had a detestable thing here, that you are much too cultured ever to have encountered, a thing called a gramophone, I should make you laugh into it whenever I felt dispirited and bored—oh, I do feel that way sometimes, I assure you!—I should just set the disk whirring and then—heh nonny nonny, your laughter would come rippling! It would be delightful for me, wouldn't it?" His moment's impressive gravity over, the noise that he praised gathered and broke again. Hilda, who had been facing the invasion with amiable fortitude, strolled to the door, and, squeezing Nelly's arm, slipped out. She had had enough of it.

Nelly remained where she was, deadly still. All the fierce angers and reproaches of her miserable week were seething within her. A hundred bitter taunts and gibes were leashed in her brain to leap out at Anthony when she had him alone. She trembled with fury. Her grey eyes blazed.

The Ahearn-Wylies were enjoying themselves. They were collecting impressions to compare on the way home. Preparing, had they known it, to quarrel a little as to who was most admired. They sat about, swung their buckled shoes, or crossed

them, lounging in the big chairs, admired the view from the windows, pulled and poked at everything, asked bold questions, peeped at themselves in the old mirror, rolled their eyes, blushed, flashed their teeth in smiles to one another. Nelly considered it a sickening performance. To her they had as many claims to beauty as a bevy of dog-faced baboons in an ape-house. Certainly their eyes were set too shallow and too high; but she was not just to them.

The blue-eyed girl pulled open a door in the press, she was making a final round of inspection, and discovered the little package that contained Nelly's ring.

"What's this? I'm going to peep. May I?" she cried in one breath, snatching it out of the paper, before either question could be answered. She held up the little sparkling rapunzel; they crowded to see it.

"How perfectly enchanting!" "How sweet!" "How lovely!" "Who is it for?"

Nelly leant forward quivering. To her it was a living thing that they handled so thoughtlessly.

"Oh, that's just an experiment. Nothing very important," said Anthony quickly.

"How I wish it was for me," said the boldest one, "can't you make me one like it? Will you?"

"Perhaps I will, if you very much want it."

"My ring," wailed Nelly's thought, "he will not even let my ring belong to me." For the first time the indignity of her position stung her. She heard the rest of the conversation.

"But can't I have this, if it isn't anything special?"

"I'll make you a better one—with sapphires to match those eyes."

"But I've taken such a fancy to this."

"You'll like the other better."

"Oh, shall I?" she pouted a minute. "Well, be sure you don't forget or I shall send Papa to bully you."

She pushed Nelly's ring pettishly away.

Soon after she and her sisters "made their curtsy," as they called it, and the air was free of their babble. And as they went Anthony, for the first time, noticed Nelly.

"Why, child," he cried, holding out his arms to her, "where have you been hiding yourself?"

Without answering, Nelly ran to the window and flung it open. She was trembling with rage.

"Now one can breathe!"

"My dear Nelly!"

"I'm not your dear Nelly."

"My child—"

"Don't speak to me."

She stamped her foot.

"You absurd person, what's all this fuss about?"

He tried to take her in his arms.

She struggled away and faced him furiously.

"Why did you let her touch my ring?"

"I shall let people do as I like in here."

"No, you shan't. I won't have it."

"You are ridiculous!"

"I hate you," the words burst from her.

"Nelly!"

"Why are you going away?"

"I'm going because I must."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What difference would that have made? I couldn't stay here for ever."

"You're just sneaking away to get rid of me!"

"You are jealous of those silly girls."

"You didn't think them silly when they were in here."

"Oh yes, I did."

"Why did you talk to them like that, then?"

"My good child, I shall talk just as I please."

"I hate your humbug. You never mean a word that you say."

"Look here, Nelly! Don't make scenes!" he was angry too. "I've had enough of it. I don't like it. Please control yourself. You are behaving ridiculously."

"Oh, how can you talk to me like that?"

Followed tears. In the end he had to comfort her.

"You know you are the sweetest, loveliest of them all."

He was not going for a week or two.

"Let us make the most of what time we have."

He kissed her eyes and her cheeks and her mouth and her chin. They were all salt with her tears. As she went down the hill she realized that they had not talked of his going away at all. She had somehow lost sight of it. The big thing had got blurred and intertwined with paltry angers, jealousies, reproaches. What had become of all those moving speeches she had meant to make? What had happened? Somewhere at the back of her brain her mother's voice began an insistent iteration—how long ago had she heard her say those things?

"Don't reproach a man. Don't cry at him. Don't show him your temper. He'll only congratulate himself when it's all over, and it'll be over quicker."

They were not much good at taking advice, her mother and she.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MOVES TOWARDS A CLIMAX

SHE tried to put the parting from her mind. She resumed her old relations with Tony with the added intimacy that a quarrel gives. They had now seen one another free of the restraint of politeness and of the pretence that all was well. Anthony had kissed her face distorted with crying, and she had declared her right to be angry with him. Now she was almost too happy. The thought of his going still stabbed at her, but she was hidden deep and shielded by his caresses.

She was always at the studio in those last days. She was quite scared at the resolute way he contrived to keep people away. Hilda he persuaded to work out a scheme for redecorating the drawing-room. He told her she must spend a lot of time there to let the proportions "soak in" and inspire her. If he liked her design it should be carried out that autumn—"There's glory for you." Pandolefsky was simply bidden "go and find something to do."

Anthony was drifting just as Nelly had drifted. The fact that so soon he would be out of it all made him careless. He was going to permit these days as many hours of honey as he could. It was not pure selfishness. It was the only mercy he could

show the girl now. Then what would be hers to regret when he was gone would be happiness and not bitterness of heart. Besides, when he was with Nelly he loved her to distraction. Whatever way he chose to justify himself when she was not there, when she was near his loving was its own justification. He would sit beside her in the window seat and wish they were in a boat on some wide river together, and while his mind was filled with sensuous thoughts he would listen to her soft voice, speaking her simple, trivial longings and ambitions, speaking in time to the beat of his thoughts.

“Sometimes I want motors and diamonds and a big house and servants, so that I could go and make all the people who don’t like me envious. I should go and drive slowly past their stupid old doors and know that inside they were gnashing their teeth with fury. But I shouldn’t really like that. I’d feel it was too much for me. But I should like a few pretty things. Frocks and silk petticoats and smart shoes like other girls have. And a little, little house with great big window-boxes full of pink geraniums. And one old servant to mend me and keep me tidy.”

Anthony kissing her hand, the back and the palm and each finger in turn, asked—

“And who’s to give you those little things?”

“Ah, someone I love.”

“What about the nice hump-backed gentleman you were going to marry?”

“Oh, I’m not going to marry him now.”

“Why not, Nellie?”

“You know why not.”

“Ah, but tell me!”

She told him.

He thought, "Poor little love, if I've made you resolve against that I'm not altogether a brute."

"And what sort of fellow is to give you the little house with the window-boxes?"

"Nobody ever will, Tony."

"Sure?"

She shook a mournful head. "Sure."

"Shall I?"

She thought of what Pandolefsky had said to her.

"You don't want to, do you?"

He reproached himself for having made her love him.

"I shall only have brought you unhappiness, Nelly."

"Oh, don't say that!" She took his face between her hands. "Don't say that. I can't bear you to think that. You've made me happier than anyone in the world."

"Darling, then why are there tears in your eyes?"

"I'm so happy, Tony. I can't bear it all to end. Ah, why must it end?"

He studied her.

"Do you think, Nell, if you were with me always you would always be happy?"

She raised her mouth to his.

"Ah, Nelly, you love me too much," he said.

Every day he determined to be kind to her, and yet every day he found himself provoking her.

"How much would you do for me?"

"Anything at all, Tony?"

"I don't think you love me really."

“You know, you know I do.”

Or he would find himself wanting to hurt her, to tease and torment her.

“You know that I am behaving disgracefully?”

“Tony, that’s rubbish. You couldn’t do anything wrong.”

“Nelly, do you ever think what you are doing?”

“Indeed I do, often.”

“What makes you so reckless, then?”

“Am I reckless? Don’t other people love one another like this?”

“You angel.” He kissed her hand.

“Don’t they, Tony?”

“Not conventional young women, dear.”

“Oh, Tony,” she was swept with grief; “I thought I was loving you the proper way.”

“Ah, golden heart. What I lose in leaving you,” he thought, and—

“Dearest, I wish I could make you stop loving me,” he said.

“You couldn’t, Tony, you couldn’t. It isn’t in your power.”

That comforted him a little. It wasn’t in his power. But he wished aloud sometimes that he were more of a blackguard so that he wouldn’t mind being one.

“What do you find to love in me? I’ve been a cad ever since you knew me? How can you love a cad, Nelly?”

She would praise him.

“I wish you would criticize me sometimes, Nelly.”

“Oh, Tony,” she said, with her old *naïveté*, “that makes me so unhappy.”

Yet after every happy hour the parting had crept nearer. It gave Nelly a sense of being stalked. She was conscious of an ever watchful grief awaiting its opportunity. There seemed no moment appropriate to voicing her despair, none in which to arouse the emotional crisis which alone, she instinctively knew, could save her.

As once before, it was common circumstance that came to her aid. The Height became again packed with visitors. There was never a tranquil hour in the pale sun-flooded studio. For three days she never caught sight of him alone, and then one afternoon as she opened the little iron gate she found him standing beside it.

"I say, when am I ever going to see you alone? I've so many things to say."

"Have you, Boss? I thought you only had to say 'good-bye.'" She cursed herself for her mechanical parrying.

"Well, you might say 'good-bye' nicely anyhow, Nelly."

"Tony, there are heaps of things I want to say too, really." Thank God, she had forced the words out. "When can I see you—really, really alone?"

Again the maddening desire to evade him entangled her. "My mother used to say," her voice was between tears and laughter, "that the best place for a private interview was an island in Piccadilly Circus at twelve noon, but no one would ever accept that as a rendezvous."

"Nelly, stop joking." ("Oh, he is in earnest," she thought, "I shall not have to *make* things happen.") "Couldn't you come up to the studio

one night when I'm"—he did not falter at the word—"busy. We shan't be disturbed. I'll give Pandolefsky a night off. He's sure to want a racket by this time. When you see my light you'll know I'm alone. Will you come?"

"But how can I get away, Boss?"

"Can't you climb out of the window? You see I must speak to you."

Oh, that emphatic speak. Of course, it was clear that she must come.

A soft night lapped in mist with stars showing only at the height of the sky, and the green-white star of the studio dazzling among the branches—Nelly locked her door and put the key in her pocket, went to her window and leaned out. She had not had much chance of reconnoitring the place where she was to climb. It might be simpler to risk unbarring the door; but the noisy stairs made a barrier. Suppose she wakened the fowls and they all started to crow! What a good thing Mrs. Elkins kept no dog. What if Hilda wanted her for anything during the night and came to the bedroom door and found it locked, and could get no answer, and roused the house, and sent for the police or the doctor from Otterbridge? But if she stopped to consider all the possible unpleasantnesses she would do nothing at all. Very cautiously she climbed on to the window-sill. It looked an uncommonly long way to the ground. Crouching she turned her face to the room and took a firm grip of the inner ledge. Bending forward she stretched her legs timorously into space, then downwards so that her toes grated against the wall. She was more afraid of making a noise than of

falling. Slowly she lowered herself till her body hung at full stretch. Her toes tingled with anxiety for the ledge above the sitting-room window, and at last they had found it a few inches higher up the wall than she had supposed. Next to grip the outer sill and feel for the sill of the sitting-room, there was no going back now. "This would be a silly way to kill myself. Suppose I really do?" she thought. The stones grazed her hands. She must drop, to reach the sill, almost a foot, the rest was easy. Feeling sick she let go her hold. Her feet had found the sill, her hands the ledge at the top of the window, one yard more and with trembling knees she was on the ground. Gracious, how she was sweating, and how the palms of her hands did smart! Moving in the shadows she set off up the hill to the studio.

Anthony was waiting for her just at the other side of the whispering trees. Half a mile of dark road, a little gate that must not clang, a steep path and bushes that brushed her face with dewy leaves and suddenly the studio a blaze of light just above her head, sooner than she had expected it. In a moment she had found the shelter of the doorway, and her fingers drummed a tattoo upon it—up and down they ran scurrying like frightened mice. Silently the door was opened, she was engulfed in brightness and the smell of homespun and tobacco. He fastened the door, holding her round the shoulders with one arm as he did so, threw his cigarette at the furnace, and stooping pressed his warm cheek against her cold one.

"Thank you for coming. I hardly dared to expect you."

As usual she had been ready to give more than he demanded. She said—

“I very nearly didn’t come, but once I’d started I couldn’t go back. Look what the wall did to me.”

“Oh, the poor little hands.” He put her into the big chair. “And now tell me what you wanted to see me about?”

“It was you that wanted to see me !”

“Was it? But I always want to see you. Aren’t you a beautiful Nelly, tell me, aren’t you ?”

Sitting on the arm of the chair with her head against his shoulder, he stroked her neck.

“Tony, dear, I want to think.”

“Don’t think, my Nelly. Forget everything. Just remember that you are here with me.”

“Oh, Tony, when you touch me I get so confused I can’t say anything I want to. And I can’t stay long.”

“Suppose I keep you ?”

“Ah, my dear, morning would come just the same.”

“Don’t talk for a little while. Let me love you.”

“No, you’ve got to listen to me. Please, Tony.”

He released her, and holding her hand bent his gaze intently on each finger in turn.

“Well,” he said.

“Tony, you are going away.”

His head still bent—

“I have to, Nelly.”

“Why have you to ?”

“Dear child, we can’t do anything for ever.”

“Why can’t we ?”

“Because—well, that’s the way of it.”

“You mean you’ve got tired of me.”

He swung round to her.

"Nelly, I haven't. I swear to you I haven't."

"What is it, then?"

"My dear, we couldn't go on like this. It isn't fair to you."

"I don't mind."

"But I mind, Nelly."

She drew her hand away from him and clenching her fists beneath her chin leant forward.

"What *is* fair to me, Tony?" she asked. He dropped to her feet and put his face upon her knees.

"What a brute, what a selfish brute I have been. Nelly, forgive me."

For a moment she longed to seize the splendid shoulders and shake them.

"I'm not asking anything unreasonable," she went on gently. "Only I can't—I can't," her voice began to shake and he began to kiss her knees—"I can't live without you, Tony."

"My poor child, my sweetest."

She bent her lips to his thick hair.

"Why must you leave me, Tony, why, why?"

"My poor beloved, isn't it the only thing?"

"Is it the only thing, Tony? Oh, don't think about being selfish," she cried, knowing he was about to reproach himself again. "Oh, don't think about being selfish. Think what is going to happen to me. You can't go away and not take me with you."

"My child, it's impossible."

"Then you are going to get away from me."

"I'm not, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Oh, Tony, forget about missing me and all that sort of thing. I want to be with

you. I want to go with you. I can't stay without you. I should kill myself. Oh, Tony, listen," she dragged him into her arms and clasped him tightly. "I'm not like other girls. I shouldn't ever trouble you. Only I can't live unless I have you sometimes. My Tony, I haven't anything to lose. There isn't anyone to care what becomes of me. No one need ever know. I'd keep your secret so well, Tony. I'd be such good company. I can't be left behind now, Tony, I want you too badly. All my people are like that—if we want anything we must have it—we must have what we've set our hearts on, Tony. If you don't take me I shall kill myself."

She was crying now soft tears that did not mar her beauty.

"If I only dared," said Anthony.

"You will, you will. Think what fun we'd have just the two of us together, Tony. You can't refuse me, Tony, when I love you so much."

"My dear, I mustn't let you."

"Mustn't you?"

Smiling she held him from her, her mouth provocingly near his.

"Say 'yes.' "

It was "yes."

Afterwards she told him: "I was so afraid you were going to be horrid. It's queer, Tony, but I wouldn't mind the whole world knowing you loved me, but I couldn't bear to know in my own heart that you didn't. I'd be so ashamed of that I think I'd die."

"My Nelly, you are all mine now. There's nobody but you in the world."

"My Tony, how solemn you are."

"When I first kissed you, you cried. Do you remember, Nelly?"

"That was because I was happy. You've always made me happy, but now I'm too excited to cry. To have you for a holiday!"

"That's it, Nelly. We'll have a holiday together," he cried, embracing her. "Oh, my love, what joy it will be. I feel like a boy, Nelly. I want to throw up my cap and shout."

They began to talk of the journey. Of course, America was out of the question.

"Well, the world was a pretty good place before Columbus was born." They would go to Paris first, of course, perhaps to Moscow, "All golden spires and domes and not a damned tourist anywhere," or along the Mediterranean to Constantinople, or to Corsica. He had always wanted to see Corsica. How they would bask in the sun!

"I shall have to put my hair up," said Nelly the practical. "And where shall I meet you, Tony?"

"I shall carry you all the way in my arms!"

"Tony, be sensible. You know we'll have to catch trains like other people."

"Then I suppose we'd better make for the nine o'clock boat train from Charing Cross on Thursday week. We'll go by Calais. The earlier we get off the better."

"I think I'd better get away and stay in town, hadn't I? People will notice so if we leave here together."

He frowned for a moment. That word "people"

it brought back all the clamorous small difficulties with which he was beset.

"I wish we could just spread wings and fly."

"But we can't, Tony; and, Tony," it was a difficult matter to suggest this, "I shall want a few things for the journey, you know."

Of course she would. Anthony would not have dared hint it for the world.

"How much will you want. A hundred pounds?"

A hundred! It was fabulous! Since she was old enough to do her own spending she had never had more than ten pounds in her hand at a time. She would take only fifty.

"I'll have the notes for you to-morrow."

Money spoilt the thing for him a little, for her it sealed the bargain.

"My Anthony," her arms shut out his thoughts. They lay in the dark and talked of what they would do and see, until the dawn came in and put a white line on Anthony's profile. Before she went they found the ring again, and slung it round her neck on the ribbon out of her chemise.

"Good-bye, my sweet. Soon we'll have no more partings."

Oh, how cold the morning air!

Down at Elkins's the ducks were just stirring. Elkins himself had unbarred the door and was raking the kitchen fire. He was a model husband. Covered by the noise Nelly regained her room. She flung herself all dressed upon the bed. Oof—but she was sleepy.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### NELLY HAYES ORDERS HER TROUSSEAU

BUT if Anthony and Nelly were making plans, gossip was busy too. The news of Anthony's departure was hailed by everyone as a sign that Mrs. Hamel had put her foot down. It was admitted that what thoughts she herself had were not easy to guess. She bestirred herself no more than usual; her voice was tranquil, her delicate profile cold as glass. No one heard her say a word on the subject, but, of course, she knew. After all, there was no mistaking it.

"One needn't adopt the most sinister interpretation, but it is high time one of them went away. I wish Erica would talk a little. I don't like to see her so proud; she'll suffer more."

"Erica is hardly the sort of person who confides her domestic afflictions to the postman on the doormat," but they thought she might afford a little more excitement to her friends.

Mrs. Hamel, polishing her nails among her embroidered bed-hangings, was neither secretive nor suffering. Proud she was, but passively; not in grim earnest, as her friends supposed. She had not observed Nelly and her husband chiefly because she would have considered such things beneath her notice; really, perhaps, because she was seldom in

any place where they were. She had a notion that Anthony was better when he was busy, and she was glad that he would be so busy in America. She would be lonely without him, but hardly more lonely than she was with him. Meanwhile they might as well be busy with a farewell garden-party and a little dinner. She did not think they had been quite friendly enough to the local people. She would want sociable neighbours when she returned in the autumn and rain and darkening days kept her friends in town, it would be nice to have a little bridge, even if one could not have a proper house-party. It would not matter trampling the lawns either now, as they would have so long to recover. Tennis and ices and summer dresses were always enjoyable. She fancied the fine weather would hold. The invitations were issued.

The garden-party was an unpleasant surprise for Nelly. That it should be on the Wednesday when Anthony should be speeding to her arms seemed to signify more than a mere coincidence.

"Oh, Hilda, I was going to tell you, I can't stay for it," she said when the invitation reached Elkins's. "I have to go up to town."

"That's a sudden resolve, isn't it?" cried Hilda in surprise. "What's the hurry?"

"Well," said Nelly weakly, "I haven't a frock."

"You can wear one of mine. Do stay; but of course you will. The party will be great fun."

"I don't think I ought to, Hilda."

There were so many things she must do: her darling clothes to try on; and she must be sure of getting away.

"Have you heard from your mother, Nelly?"

Hilda was puzzled. She had expected Nelly to rejoice at the garden-party.

"Yes," said Nelly.

Hilda looked at her doubtfully. Nelly's eyes met hers with a wilful stubbornness. Hilda began to feel worried.

Nelly had been ordering her clothes that afternoon. She had sat on a stool in the sour-smelling post-office at Otterbridge while the young lady with the paper cuffs got her number. She was going to order her things from a shop near Baker Street. Its owner had been her mother's maid at one time and had known vicissitudes. Now she owned a little shop, with three hats and two blouses in the window.

"Is that Miss Cluer? Oh, could I speak to her?"

She held the line.

"Is that you, Minnie? I'm Miss Hayes. You remember me, don't you? I want a whole lot of things. Do write them down. I'll send the money by registered letter immediately. Will you get me a trunk and pack it?"

"Are you getting married, Miss Hayes?" Miss Cluer's genteel voice came thin over the telephone.

"Why, yes," said Nelly, "I suppose I am."

"You haven't wasted much time," said Miss Cluer a trifle less genteelly.

"I suppose not," said Nelly, laughing.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said I suppose not."

"How much did you wish to spend?"

"Not more than fifty pounds."

"I suppose you only want to buy the under-clothing, then?"

Nelly blushed in the box.

"I want to buy everything: something of everything. Just enough for the journey." (She had an inspiration.) "I shall be getting most of my things in Paris."

Miss Cluer was now respectful. She would read through the lists.

"Chemise nine and eleven, camisole five and eleven, nightgown thirteen and eleven, knickers seven and eleven. Or we have a better quality. Chemise twelve and eleven, knickers nine and eleven, camisole seven and eleven, nightgown eighteen and eleven. American shape, short sleeves. Yes, these are very pretty. Hand-made, of course, trimmed good val edging and insertions. Or you can have cluny edging or torchon; they come dearer. The real lace, you know. Or we have the plain embroidered ones." The list again. How Nelly longed to be rummaging in the shop herself! It took away all enjoyment, this dull business of mouth and ear. Finally she arranged, as that lady had intended, to trust Miss Cluer to choose her something pretty.

They went on to stockings.

"We can do you a reliable spun silk at four and six, or the pure silk at seven and eleven."

They left that question to Miss Cluer, too. It would depend on what they had over.

Corsets then. "Oh, I can never fit on a corset by telephone!"

"If you will tell me the make and size you are wearing at present—" Miss Cluer's patient voice. The list again: through "Daphne and Silver Swan," through *coutille* and *broché* and four sus-

penders and six suspenders. Nelly, in her mind's eye, could see Miss Cluer holding them against her own taut figure. In the end that, too, was left to Miss Cluer. Life was hardly worth living.

Then about the travelling clothes. Miss Cluer supposed she would wear blue? Brides usually did.

"Well, I don't want to," said Nelly.

"Grey, then," said Miss Cluer; "it will have to be grey. We have some very nice little three-piece suits in silk serge. I dare say we could alter one of those to fit you—they work out at seven guineas. And a hat?"

"Can't I wear a bonnet?" asked Nelly.

They didn't want, after all, or did they, to be a trifle—well, theatrical-looking? suggested Miss Cluer. Of course, if Miss Hayes particularly wanted a bonnet—Nelly had particularly wanted a bonnet.

"I don't see how I can get a hat to suit me without trying it on."

"Oh, with your hair you can wear anything, Miss Hayes. I only wish I had you for the millinery branch," said Miss Cluer. "Of course, you have put your hair up?"

"Oh yes—at least, it will be up by then."

Then there was a petticoat, and shoes, and a silk wrapper, and gloves, and a cloak for the boat.

"And oh, Miss Cluer, I must have a dressing-bag of some kind to put the things in—"

In the end they had just enough chosen for the journey, with a change of linen, and her bill came to forty-seven pounds nine shillings.

Miss Cluer congratulated her on its moderation.

Would she have pink or blue ribbons in her underclothing?

Very pale blue, Nelly instructed her.

And how would she like them marked—with the full name or initials?

Oh, that would not matter.

No extra charge for marking them.

Nelly thanked her, but that would be "all right."

She was vexed with herself for being sensitive to such a question. She would try and get round on Tuesday or Wednesday to see the things. If not, would Miss Cluer have them ready for her before eight on Thursday? It was frightfully important. Well, really, what a very unusual request! The shop did not open until ten o'clock. Miss Cluer herself never breakfasted before nine.

"Really, Miss Hayes, it is out of the question."

Well, Nelly must try and fetch them on Wednesday at latest.

Bother and blast! That old shark Minnie Cluer had grown too big for her boots. Going to sell her a lot of antediluvian stuff out of stock, too. Well, Nelly would know what to say when she saw her.

She bought postal orders for two pounds and nine shillings, added them to her five-pound notes, and dispatched them to Baker Street. No use expecting Minnie Cluer to start any work for her till she'd spotted the cash with her own eye. Nelly's mother had often said that Minnie Cluer had an eye you could hammer a nail on. Nelly pushed the letter through the letter-box.

So that was settled. She was glad, but she could not believe it quite real. She could not see herself

clear and triumphant in those new clothes. Her old brown skirt, frayed round the tail, seemed to belong to her as nearly as her skin. Was it possible to make one step and leave poverty and squalor and loneliness and uncertainty behind for ever? She was going to do that, her brain told her so, but something else in her could not respond to the good news. She was like a man with a winning lottery ticket who suspects there must be some mistake. She did not feel happy. She had a premonition of failure. Success could not be so easy of attainment as this, or there would be no misery in the world. Things had gone too well of late. The garden-party came upon her now with a disagreeable jerk. If she had to stay for that her plans had all gone to criminis. She braced herself to meet Hilda's interrogation.

That young woman assumed a judicial air.

"Well, Nelly, is it that you've heard from your mother, which is very important, or is it that you haven't a frock, which isn't important at all?"

"It's both," said Nelly, pouting at this scrutiny. "Really I can't stay, Hilda."

Doubts that had been nibbling at Hilda's peace for a long while, had she admitted their existence, seized on her now with a sharp pang.

"What's up, Nelly?" she asked, feeling cold with unnamed anxiety. "What's gone wrong lately?"

"Nothing, Hilda, nothing." Nelly shook her head. "Really nothing."

"Haven't you been happy? Aren't you happy?"

Nelly sprang to her feet. After all, it was easy to get round old Hilda.

"You dearest stupid," she cried, clasping her in her arms, "of course I've been happy: happier than ever I've been in my life."

Hilda kissed her and disengaged herself. She was not altogether pleased with that affectionate term "stupid." She began to fear that it suited her too well.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A VULGAR ROW—HILDA FORGETS THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO MAKE A SOW'S EAR OUT OF A SILK PURSE

HILDA, lacerated with curiosity, walked about the garden of The Height. She no longer felt the world a good place to be in. She no longer felt satisfied with her work, with her master, with her future, with her hitherto so admirable achievements. The bell of her self-sufficiency was cracked. What was it, this something that was on foot behind her, that turned when she turned, dodged when she dodged? Why could not her thoughts penetrate at once to the centre of the mystery? Stupid. That was what Nelly had said. Hilda began to wonder if B.A.'s and artistic accomplishments were cleverness after all. If they were not—why, then every nimble woman with tilted hat from Bayswater to Kensington was cleverer than she. She pushed back her hair and turned into the dappled shadow of the orchard. Her young face was innocent as Mother Eve's among the apple stems. Choosing his moment, Mr. Pandolefsky came to join her.

“‘In maiden meditation fancy free,’” was his greeting from behind.

“Oh, Mr. Pandolefsky,” was hers.

“Not many more of these pleasant days for us to spend together,” said he.

"No, indeed," said Hilda. It had not struck her that Pandolefsky had been part of the pleasure.

"I've some important news I think you ought to hear, Miss Concannon."

"Oh, have you?" said Hilda.

"Of course you may know it already. I may be a day or two after the fair. Am I right?"

"I don't know quite what you mean," said Hilda.

"It's not exactly good news, Miss Concannon. I can't be certain if I ought to tell you. It concerns another person altogether. I might say another person's welfare—"

Hilda's heart leaped. She was to learn after all. The mystery was about to be solved. Thirsty with eagerness, she assumed her most snubbing manner.

"If it concerns someone in whose welfare I am interested," she said grandly, "I think I should hear it."

Pandolefsky licked his lips.

There was not much of Nelly's secret that he had missed—only that intangible tenderness of hers that lifted all her actions from the squalid to—well, to some other thing.

"I don't know if I've done right, coming to you about it, Miss Concannon. I've been looking for an opportunity these last few days. But it seemed to be coming to a head, Miss Concannon, and I wouldn't like anything to happen that we might be sorry for. Perhaps I should have spoken to Mrs. Hamel about it; but it seems such a pity to make her unhappy, Miss Concannon."

"Someone's got to be unhappy," said Hilda grimly. "Please don't mention this to anybody else."

"No fear of that, Miss Concannon."

Hilda wanted to scream at him: "And don't call me 'Miss Concannon' every other second."

Instead she said, "It may not be so serious as you think."

"It may not. I dare say the Boss knows his own business best. But it seems such a pity." He dwelt on the pity of it. "She's very flighty, but such a taking little thing. I couldn't help kissing her myself when she first came here."

He spoke as if his discovery of the girl's less noble qualities had quenched his flame.

Hilda cut short his reminiscences.

She felt as if she had been slapped in the face. This, then, was the fact to which her eyes had been blinded. Fierce anger woke in her. She knew only that she must get at Nelly and blaze the knowledge at her. How dared the girl! how dared she! Her baseness was a humiliation. How could she play such a vile, bestial game. She stumbled down the hill to Elkins's. Her anger could hardly contain itself. She wanted to rail and strike things. She was too fierce to be surprised at herself.

At Elkins's she found Nelly trying to read a novel in the sitting-room.

"Hello, what's up?" the girl asked seeing Hilda's furious face.

Hilda shut the door, then she turned, trembling; she was going, she thought, to be very dignified.

"Nelly," she said, "Pandolefsky has been talking about you."

"I don't care. Let him talk," said Nelly, with staccato jauntiness. She shut her book and rose uneasily from her chair.

"He's a hateful creature. I always told you he was. He talks as if—" Hilda paused, her anger leaping. "He says that you— Oh, how am I to tell you *what* he says?"

Nelly stood by the table, fingering the cloth. She did not want to hear what Pandolefsky had said. She did not want to have this disagreeable talk with Hilda. She was absurdly like a naughty child caught stealing biscuits.

"Can't you guess what he says?"

"Don't want to," the golden head was shaken.

"Stop fooling, Nelly," Hilda suddenly shouted at her. "Don't you see I know?"

"Know what?" said Nelly with feeble effrontery.

"I know what has been happening all this time. You've been letting Mr. Hamel make love to you."

Nelly laughed shakily. "That's all right."

"What do you mean by 'that's all right'? Do you mean it's true?"

"Well, what if it is?"

"What if it is? Nelly, it's outrageous."

"I don't see that it matters to you."

Hilda ignored that remark, it was too preposterous; of course the thing mattered to her—mattered tremendously, or she would not feel so furious about it.

"Pandolefsky says you've been kissing him."

"Kissing him!"

"Kissing Mr. Hamel. Have you been letting him kiss you, Nelly?"

Hilda's cheeks were hot with blushes. It was not she who had been misbehaving, and yet she felt the humiliation of it.

"Only in the studio," said Nelly, as if that were an extenuating circumstance.

Hilda was shocked, so she told herself, by the brazen unconcern of this avowal, but what seethed within her was a deeper feeling—resentment at being hoodwinked, the bitterness of being "left out"; above all, the quick pain and jealousy that Anthony, whom she admired so much, should so single out another. She had always believed in passionate love, but this was nothing but vileness. She forgot her modern authors, and repeated a maxim from the copy book for young ladies.

"No nice girl would let a man kiss her unless they were engaged."

"Such rot. Such absolute rot. What do you know about it?"

"Not very much, I'm thankful to say," said Hilda.

Nelly laughed an irritating laugh.

"*I am* thankful to say it," cried Hilda.

"There's no harm in it," said Nelly, sulking again.

"Harm! But Mr. Hamel is married."

"You make me laugh," said Nelly savagely.

"What about, Mrs. Hamel? What would she think?"

"She won't care," said Nelly quickly; "she won't know."

"That makes it beneath contempt. It's so dishonourable."

"It can't hurt her. She won't know. Why should she have everything?"

"Don't talk so wickedly and stupidly! You've got to face the facts."

"Oh, Lord, have mercy upon us!"

"Stop being so silly. You are making a desperate fool of yourself."

"I can manage my own affairs, thank you. I don't want your advice. When I do I'll ask for it."

She flounced to the door.

"Stand still and listen, will you? Pandolefsky told me something else. He says you have actually been planning to go away with Mr. Hamel."

"Pandolefsky knows a lot!"

"Nelly, you shall talk about it. Think what you are doing. Has he promised to marry you?"

"Marry me!" Nelly broke into a laugh.  
"Marry me! You little sea-green gooseberry!  
Marry me, my heavenly dear!"

"And you are going away with him, all the same?"

"I didn't say so."

"Are you going?"

"I won't be bossed by you."

"Are you going?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Is it to meet him you are going back to Town?"

"I shan't tell you."

"Did you get a letter from your mother?"

"Yes, I did."

"I don't believe you."

"Very well; I'm lying."

"Yes, you are. Who else have you been kissing?"

“Find out !”

“I mean to. Did you kiss Pandolefsky ?”

“You’d better ask him.”

“Oh, it’s too disgusting !”

“There was no harm in it.”

Loathing drenched Hilda.

“He’s such a beast !”

“Well, if he’s such a beast, why were you so keen to listen to him ?”

It was Hilda’s turn to be reproved, but Nelly could not maintain her advantage.

“And I kissed Teddie Armour, too; and you can’t say he’s a beast.”

Hilda’s mind was in confusion.

“But you refused to marry him ?”

“That wasn’t a reason for being disagreeable, was it ?”

(Disagreeable ! Must one, for politeness’ sake, kiss all the men one met ?)

“And dear Stevie.”

“Steven Young ?” Hilda felt the pang of jealousy again. She had always regarded him as particularly her friend.

“Oh, they’re all alike ! He isn’t a paragon.”

Then, seeing the pain in Hilda’s face, her good-nature added—

“But he only kissed my hand.”

“I knew he was different,” cried Hilda.

“Yes; he’s a bit of a prig.”

Hilda could have strangled her.

“Well, you are mighty pleased with yourself,” she said; “but let me tell you all this is going to stop. There will be no more of this sort of thing.

I ought to have taken better care of you. You will stay for the party and go up to town with me when I go."

"You've no right to interfere."

"Yes, I have. Anyone has. I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, I do."

"Go and talk to Tony Hamel, then. Tell him he's a naughty boy."

"For a very little, I'd go and tell Mrs. Hamel."

"Tell away, Miss Busybody. You'll see how she likes it."

"You'll see how everyone likes it. Understand me, Nelly: if you don't behave yourself I'll tell Mrs. Hamel the whole story. Will you stay now, or won't you?"

Nelly measured her. There was nothing to be gained by prolonging the quarrel. She would find a way out presently.

"Will you stay?"

"I will."

They hated each other.

Hilda, bright-eyed, picked up a book and pretended to read—pretended to herself, too, that she was reading with great composure. She had put her foot down and ended the whole infamous and silly business. From time to time she shook a little from the force of her indignation. Not one corner of the world but must be smirched and filthied with these transitory passions. Why couldn't people have self-control? It made one hate all love, this travesty of it. Was all freedom

and companionship and equality between men and women to be a disguise for the secret wallowings of beasts? It was an outrage on fineness and sense and decency. Mrs. Hamel was quite right. It was a mistake to pick up casual acquaintances. Nelly had not one of the ideas that made life tolerable for the rest of them. She was a female Pandolefsky. She was uncivilized. She had spoilt everything. If they had prepared to go away openly together she could have admired them, she lied to herself. She would not then have felt the same torment of anger. It was this furtive lechery —like an escaped bitch. It degraded all womanhood. All she could do now was to save the girl from herself. Clearly she was lost to all sense of shame. Mrs. Hamel was quite right: you could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The most one could do was to insist upon decency. Mrs. Hamel was quite right—that was the sickening thing that made her so angry; that must be it. Behaviour like Nelly's played into the hands of all the Grundies and fogies and odious, backward people. It justified every wink and every leer. Oh, she would do her best for the girl this once, and afterwards—well, some day she might be grateful.

Upstairs, Nelly lay on her bed, flushed and rigid, trying to stifle the misery that was choking her. She felt adrift in a whelming sea where there was no swimming. She could not struggle against her destiny. She was in the grip of misfortune. Things had been going too well—too well. She was not meant for happiness.

She felt for Tony's ring where it lay between her breasts. She clasped her hands upon it and held it to her as if it also were desolate and in grief. Guarding it so, the tears flowed from beneath her eyelids. Presently she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XX

### MORE UNPLEASANTNESS—THE GARDEN-PARTY

THE day of the garden-party dawned warm and cloudy with a promise of bright sun. On one of the lawns a small marquee was being erected. The noise of the hammers broke the still air ominously. It might have been a scaffold or a coffin they were making.

Nelly awoke to a consciousness of trouble. It was gnawing at her breast before she recollected the reason of it. Hilda was up already. Nelly could hear her moving in the next room. Could she escape her vigilance, she wondered, and get an early train to town? Still she must see Tony for a minute before she went. There must be no risk of a change of plan at the last moment. She heard Hilda pause outside her door and her brows drew together, the door opened, she lay looking at the ceiling, Hilda did not look at her either. She said, "Are you coming down to breakfast?"

"No," said Nelly.

"Oh, very well," the door was shut.

Nelly lay sulking. She wanted to get up, but she wanted still more to irritate Hilda. She lay on pretending to sleep. Presently Hilda came upstairs again.

"Are you going to lie in bed all day?"

"No, I'm not."

"Why don't you get up, then?"

"I've no reason for getting up, have I?"

"Look here, Nelly," said Hilda, "I was a beast last night. Do cheer up! You know I wish you every good thing, don't you? Can't you see how impossible a mad plan like yours would be? Be a nice child."

No response. She tried again.

"Come and choose what you want for this afternoon. You can have my Liberty muslin, if you like."

"I'm not going to the garden-party."

"Oh, but you must."

"I'm not going."

"Nelly, don't be a fool," Hilda's temper surged up again. "I've said we'd go, and we are going to behave as if nothing had happened."

"You can go if you like. I shall stay here."

"Then I must stay too."

"You are unbearable."

"It's no use getting into a rage. I'm not going to let you out of my sight, so you can make up your mind to that."

"Very well, then I stay where I am."

She turned over and drew up the bed-clothes. Hilda waited a minute.

"Oh, very well, of course, if you won't be friends," she said. She went downstairs again.

"*Idiot*," said Nelly.

Presently she rolled out of bed and prepared to dress herself.

She was brushing her hair when Hilda came in again.

"Hullo, I thought you weren't getting up?"

"I suppose I can change my mind, can't I?"

"Oh, of course." She went into her own room. How silly it all was, quarrelling like schoolgirls.

She got out a little pink muslin dress with a net fichu and carried it into Nelly's room.

"What's that for?" asked Nelly.

"Won't you wear it this afternoon?"

"I don't want anything of yours." The hostile voice trembled.

"Dear Nelly, don't keep it up so long. I'm awfully sorry for having spoken so rudely, but *nobody* could *help* feeling the way I did."

Nelly looked at her. It amazed her to see how little Hilda realized the importance of the affair. At last she said—

"Hilda, you're a brick. Forgive me for being rude too."

Hilda kissed a cold little cheek. She felt the joy of Heaven over the repentant sinner. She felt the conquest of reason over instinct, of right over wrong. Everything was splendid. Nelly would wear the dress. Her pride always yielded to seduction. What a good time they would have! What a day for ices!

The garden-party was in full swing when they arrived. The lawns were crowded with women in light dresses islanding the rarer figures of men, Miss Fitch, with the smartest of sunshades, waved a gay hand to them. Mrs. Arden smiled from her chair. The Spink girls, already flushed from tennis, bounded towards them. The air was full of the shrill chatter of voices saying nothing very interesting and nothing very witty, just the voices of people conscientiously enjoying themselves.

Mrs. Hamel, white-clad and frail as an anemone, shook hands with them on the steps. Tony was nowhere to be seen, he was exhibiting the treasures of the studio. Mrs. Eckstein hustled over, elaborately skirted and in all the latest mysteries of fashion. Steven Young and Arden Keath greeted them, and they went to find ices together. They joined Miss Fitch and made small jokes in the tumult. Their remarks were all disconnected and irrelevant. When the noise lulled occasionally they could only look at one another and laugh, they had no preparedness for these opportunities.

Nelly could not see Tony anywhere. Her eyes sent anxious glances into every corner of the garden, but he was nowhere to be seen. And then at last she perceived him. He was passing along the terrace, laughing with some of his friends. He was bare-headed, suited in white, resplendent beneath the sun. Involuntarily she moved toward him. He saw her, paused in his talk, called to her, "Having a good time, dear child?" He did not notice her wanness. People bore down upon him. She was swept away in the flood. The smile left her lips. She felt worn out and tired to exhaustion. She left the group beside the fuchsia-hedge, and wandered down to where the green carpet of the grass bordered the lily pond. There the darting dragon-flies hung, and the music of the band came with a velvet drowsiness. She stood and looked at the great waxen flowers and the brown water. Between her and the multitude crowding the terraces there seemed to be an impenetrable veil. She could hear the voices and the laughter, but remotely as if through a glass screen.

A fish came to the surface of the pond among the lily stems, and watched her for what seemed a long time with its insolent, unspeculating eyes. All the eyes behind her in the garden had seemed to oppose to her that same undeviating stare. She was in the world, but she had nothing to do with them. There was nobody on her side. Tony was not thinking of her. For a moment her soul seemed to plunge into an abyss of darkness without sound.

Miss Fitch and Mrs. Arden had noticed her depression. They sent Ardent Keath up the hill to find ices for them. Then they looked at one another.

"Well, what do you think of it?" their eyes said.

"The poor child is extravagantly in love," said Miss Fitch. "I wish I'd warned her long ago."

"Really Anthony Hamel is a heartless, self-centred—"

"Oh, don't call him that, poor darling! Don't call him that! He never thinks what he's doing. He can't sight a pretty girl a mile away without making a run for her. It is his nature to."

"Oh, it's all very well for us to laugh. We are hardened. But for a woman who cares—"

"Oh, my dear, don't let other people's troubles distress you more than they do themselves. No one is ever hurt by an unhappy love affair in the long run. It's like cutting teeth. Painful, but worth while in the end. Besides, you know, I'm not so sure that this *is* an unhappy love affair."

"But surely—!" There was only one happy ending for Mrs. Arden.

"Well, if you won't think me too scandalous—I think Tony is infatuated too."

"But, my dear! He's old enough to be her father! He thinks of her in quite a different way, I'm sure! He feels himself a sort of uncle!"

"A most dangerous feeling."

"Oh, you're an incurable cynic. I'm sure the whole thing is innocent."

"Oh, innocent! Good gracious, yes. But not in the Biblical sense!"

"Has Erica noticed anything?"

"Oh, Erica is very well able to take care of herself." Miss Fitch did not relate the history of her defeats. She had risked a snub in saying to Mrs. Hamel: "Tony admires Nelly Hayes greatly, doesn't he?" and received it with the reply: "Oh, we *all* admire her."

"Well, I can't feel happy about it," said Mrs. Arden. She had a memory of a man she had liked in the early days of her marriage, and of how he had said bitterly to her because she was in the height of her loveliness: "Of course, you are too good to care for anyone but your husband." To which she had replied: "Not too good, only too lucky." She believed that to be profoundly true. She could not with Miss Fitch think cheerfully of loves that pass away leaving no trace. For her own part such a thing would have ruined her and set the castle of her life tumbling about her ears. Miss Fitch said these things were not so, and Miss Fitch was notoriously clever. All the same, temperaments differed. A flirtation to one woman might be a broken heart to another. (Mrs. Arden

believed in broken hearts.) She thought she would go and talk to the girl.

She came upon her by the lily pond.

“What’s the matter, Rapunsel? Are you ill?”  
She took Nelly by the arm.

The pale face turned to her, and a weak voice from what seemed far away prayed to her—

“Be kind to me.”

## CHAPTER XXI

### MARKING TIME—AN HONEST INDIAN ASS GOES FOR AN UNICORN—FAREWELLS

THE long dinner-table of dark mahogany reflected the bright silver, the flowers, the glasses, the china, the lighted candles, as the tangled flowers of a meadow bank hang down into a stream. The walls, hidden with old tapestry, were shadowed and remote, the ceiling with its shallow arches was gently mysterious, dark curtains hid the daylight.

Round the table talk and laughter wove a garland. The candle flames lit white hands, shone starry-pointed in eyes, drew into momentary splendour a pendent jewel.

Mrs. Hamel had Sir Galton Strong on her right, and smiled with a faint radiance upon her distinguished guest. At the other end of the room was Anthony between Mrs. Arden and a handsome stranger. Hilda had been taken in to dinner by Steven Young, Nelly by Ardent Keath, but this was by an oversight on Mrs. Hamel's part, who had intended her to have an exceedingly intellectual partner with a stammer. Miss Fitch had gallantly volunteered for him at the last moment, and was flooding conversation into his ears without giving him time to answer. The Ecksteins were there also, and an enormously successful novelist (whom Ardent Keath after dinner looked forward to

instructing in the rudiments of his art), and Mr. Joppling, of Burton-under-Lyne, who had a legacy to spend for a local Art Gallery.

Nelly had put up her hair for the occasion. It had taken a long time and made her arms ache, and now she was watching Tony's face for a sign that he noticed the great change. The table seemed to her a board set for an elaborate game whose rules she did not know. She had never been at a dinner-party before—indeed, she had only been invited to this one at the last moment to make the fourteenth guest. The array of knives and forks frightened her. She watched to see what her neighbours did before she dared touch anything. She was between Mr. Joppling and Ardent Keath, and the latter had eyes only for the abandoned novelist and the former for what was on his plate. Hilda's eyes, too, all the time in scrutiny of her, added to the ordeal. Her mouth was quite dry with nervousness. She felt as if she were perched in some remote part of the room near the cornice looking on, instead of taking part. The only attention she received from her neighbours was when Ardent Keath stooped for her napkin, and she saw no sign of interest in Mr. Joppling's face till its expression of honest pain and amazement when he heard her say "Thank you" to the butler. She had a miserable time. She wished she had skipped the *entrée*, as had the handsome stranger, and then when she did imitate her by skipping the joint (the stranger's handsomeness was of the increasing kind) she forgot and helped herself to beans and potatoes—very difficult things to eat with a dry mouth and no gravy.

Hilda was in bad spirits. She could not help thinking of Nelly and Hamel sitting so near one another without a sign of their true nearness. She saw them ugly with hypocrisy. She rejoiced that she had Nelly imprisoned there. Sir Galton Strong, a most irksome bore, but an authority on tropical plants and the finest writer of *villanelles* in England, a staunch town-planner, too, was attacking in his usual way the degenerate age in which he found himself.

“Why, with all this cotton-wool wrapping, people soon won’t know what suffering is. If we aren’t going to have any more pain I don’t see what’s to become of courage and all the Christian virtues.”

“Mercy!” said Miss Fitch. “I suppose we’ll still be able to hit our funny-bones!”

“It seems to me that the exercise of the Christian virtues has never been begun,” said Steven of the serious eyes.

“But I maintain that it’s an incontrovertible fact—” Sir Galton filled his lungs—“that the present generation is flabby. In the old days if a man broke his leg he called for a hatchet and chopped it off himself! We’ve no stamina nowadays. We flinch rather than endure. We are putting scientific discovery in the place of fortitude. We shall learn to be noble not by the spirit soon, but by prescription. It seems to me the finest things are in danger of being coddled out of the world.”

They did the decay of the sense of beauty after that, and heard the words “deplorable” and “lamentable.” And after that came Cubism and Dynamism and Vorticism, all of which the success-

ful novelist disposed of by saying that he'd seen "the same sort of stuff in Paris five years ago"! At the other end of the table Anthony was discussing his chances of being allowed to paint the interior carvings of Christ Church Priory.

"What places of flame and glory the churches must have been in the old days, now so many echoes and gaunt stones!"

"Perhaps it was when the colour began to go the congregations went into dissent?"

"Oh, visual beauty is never much attraction," said the handsome lady. "Dissenters prefer puce window-frames and corrugated iron roofs."

"Not only Dissenters. Look at the concert halls. Their audiences are of the elect, but *look* at the halls!"

"Isn't the Catholic revival a move towards beauty?"

"Ah, the Mother and Child. That's the bribe. Women look at the baby and men at the Mother's face."

"Women look at the Mother's face too, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Arden, smiling.

"I am in favour of the Greek Church myself," said Mr. Eckstein.

"Russian ballet?"

"No; icons. I should like an excuse for an icon with a little lamp before it in my room, and to sprinkle incense, and so on."

"Well, dear," said his wife across the table, "we can have one put in to-morrow if you like."

An icon or a geyser—it was all one to her. Nelly wondered if they were going to sit at the table till midnight. She had somehow, she knew, to

contrive to catch the 11.15 at Otterbridge. If she did not succeed in that the world fell in pieces about her. How could she elude Hilda's watchfulness and get to the station? She had made sure she could get her own way about it in the end; she had not expected Hilda to be so mulish. There must be some word of persuasion that had failed her, some statement of her case to melt all hearts, but she had not the gift to find words for it. Should she slip into the garden after dinner and make a bolt for the station as she was? Oh, but in that case Hilda would find it a duty to tell Mrs. Hamel, and if Mrs. Hamel knew everything was over. Instinctively Nelly knew that Anthony in a big row could not be relied upon. He would so hate giving people pain he would be sure to make everybody suffer. If only she could get a minute alone with him and persuade him to bring the motor down to Elkins's for her and tear away into the night, and risk the scandal! But he would not do that. She hardly dared, she knew, to tell him there was any hitch at all; he would be so swiftly in concern for her. She must just pray for luck, she supposed. What did the tall stiff with the beard mean with his cackle about cotton-wool? What did he know about suffering?

They had reached dessert.

The evening was elaborate torture for Nelly. Why, with all her future life in the balance, must she sit on a floor in a music-room stroking a grey cat? Why must she hear people chattering above her, and then Mr. Eckstein chattering on the piano? What were all these threads of sound that never wove themselves into one warm melody?

It seemed her whole life was like that—listening to a fugue when she wanted a valse tune. She felt as if she had been buried alive and must not rap on the coffin. She got no chance of speaking to Anthony; he was engrossed with Mr. Joppling of Burton.

Somewhere a clock struck what she knew must be ten. She terrified herself by saying it was eleven. Anyhow, she must struggle out of her petrifaction. She put the cat on to the floor and rose to her feet.

“Getting stiff?” someone asked her. She realized she had been talking sometimes as well as listening all the evening.

She sought out Hilda, who was sitting not very happily with Steven.

“I’m tired,” she said; “I want to go home.”

“Surely we can’t go yet,” said Hilda; “it’s only ten o’clock.”

“I can’t help that; I’m going. You can stay if you like.”

“Oh no; I’m coming with you.”

“Very well.”

They said good-bye to Mrs. Hamel.

“So early?” came the languid voice. “Good-night, good-night. I shall see you to-morrow, Hilda?”

She resumed her conversation.

The girls moved to the door.

“I’ll put on your cloaks,” said Anthony, following them.

Was there a chance for one word? Would he be angry if she whispered to him while Hilda was there? If only he were not so ashamed of her!

She dropped her handkerchief; he stooped for it, and so did she.

"You'll wait for me if I'm late, Boss?" she breathed.

"You aren't going to back out?" Was it hope or fear struck a beat out of his heart?

"Oh no."

"Nine o'clock," he said aloud, looking into her eyes.

"Ten, Boss," said Hilda. "It's later than you think."

He turned his smile to her.

"So it is," he said, and continued smiling. "Well, good-bye." He put an arm round each of them. "I shall look forward to seeing you again." His fingers squeezed Nelly's shoulder. "We've had good times, haven't we? You won't forget me, will you?" He shook Hilda's hand. "I'd like to hear how you get on."

It was difficult to be angry with Anthony. It made it all the harder to have to think him base. Perhaps the whole bother was a figment of Nelly's vanity, thought Hilda.

He saw the girls disappear in the night. Nelly would keep her promise. He had no time to wonder how. Anyway, it was her business. If she failed—well, it could not be his fault.

He went back to more music, more laughter. Towards midnight they drank his health and wished success to his journey. He felt a great affection for his friends; it would certainly be good to get back to them. The last good-nights were said. The car that was to carry him to London came round to the door.

"But you'll get no sleep!"

"I shall sleep enough on the boat."

He ran up to change his evening things. When he came down arrayed for the journey only his wife was in the lighted hall. He kissed her, holding his soft hat in his hand. She stroked the warm, rough sleeve of his travelling coat with her slender fingers. Fine lace enveloped her shoulders; she looked frail and unusually gentle. How sad it all was, he thought; how unfortunate!

"Must you go?" she said, with just a faint note of mockery in her voice, as if she were smiling at her own solicitude.

"My darling, will you miss me?"

"Have you to ask that, Tony?"

He held her close to him.

"Take care of yourself, my precious one."

"Dear Tony, don't let it be too long before you come back."

He looked at her for a last intent moment; then, with a squeeze of her fingers, he was gone. All night following the dark road her vision pursued him: her weakness, her beauty, her fine, unwavering reserve. He hoped nothing he did would make her feel humiliated. She would always be the purest of her sex to him; nothing could smirch that vision. His mood lasted until he was breakfasting with the invaluable Prestow at the factory.

## CHAPTER XXII

### NELLY HAYES MISSES SOME TRAINS

MEANWHILE the girls were hurrying down the dark lane to Elkins's.

"What are you going to do, Nelly?" Hilda asked.

"I'm going to do as I like."

"You're not going to town to-night?"

"Yes, I am."

"You're not."

"I am."

They wrangled breathlessly, contradicting each other all down the hill.

Nelly ran up to her room.

Hilda followed her.

Nelly told her to go outside.

"You've made enough trouble for me."

"You're making far more for yourself."

"I won't be bossed by you."

"I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself."

"Get out of my way. I'm busy."

"I shan't let you leave here to-night."

Nelly flamed at her. She was tugging with might and main at the bent hooks on her evening dress. She had barely time for her train.

"You talk about freedom and liberty," she said. "But all you mean is a lot of silly rules."

"I'm not ass enough to be consistent where your safety is concerned." Hilda was adamant.

"It's all my happiness you're spoiling, you fool." Nelly was furious.

"Oh, if you're going to be rude again," said Hilda. She moved to the door. "If you intend to go away together," she said, "you shall go openly."

She snapped the key out of the lock : "If I can't keep you any other way, I shall lock you in."

"Give me that key."

"I won't."

"You shan't keep me here."

"Yes, I shall."

"You shan't." Nelly sprang towards her.

"We'll see about that." Hilda slipped through the door.

With trembling speed she thrust in the key and turned it.

"So that's settled," she said. At that grim moment, had she but known it, she was very like her father, the retired linen merchant.

For a minute or more blackness and despair reigned in the bedroom. Then shaking with anger Nelly resumed her preparations. She tore herself out of the white dress, kicked her slippers across the floor, tugged open with a crash the chest of drawers, so that everything fell over on the top of it, flittered out a blouse, thrust her arms into it, buttoned the topmost button, snatched her serge skirt from the peg on the door so that its loop broke, pulled it over her head, fastened it somehow, seized her jacket from the bed-rail, buttoned its two buttons, looked round for her cap, could

not see it, so decided to do without it, dropped her purse into her pocket, tied her shoe-strings, listened a moment, and then, with a dead calm succeeding the hurricane of her speed, crossed to the window. She listened again. No sound but the noisy breathing in her throat. She was astride the window sill. An instant more and the sick drop through the air was over. So she had gone that other night to be with Anthony—was it a year ago?

She landed lightly enough, crouching on her toes, and her hands steadied her. She sprang up and stood fronting the darkness, tense, listening. Still no sound. She crept to the gate. It was open. She slid through. The night was so still! The moonlight lay upon the world like a cold white hand. She started to run. She did not know what time it was. The fear gripped her with physical agony that she had missed the train. She ran wildly, desperately. Her heart seemed bursting, she was forced to walk again. She felt as if she were standing still. The impotence of a dream seemed fastened upon her. Every breath shook itself from her with a sob. In the reaction of her sudden activity she longed to fling herself down and sleep, to cease struggling, to cry out that she was beaten. So in torment she reached the crest of the hill.

Here the road from Elkins's to the station crossed the main road. The ground sloping lightly downwards lifted hope within her again. She broke into a trot. For a while she was a racer in winged sandals. The ground swept back from her. She combated the trembling of her mouth; she shook

back her tears. Her eyes felt dry and bright, she was conquering destiny. The grass was springy and delightful, the gorse was a host watching her run. Almost she gave a leap or two for joy as children do, wasting her strength. Presently the long, black back of the railway embankment rose up beside her. She galloped down the hill now. She could hear the train whistling. In her heart a prayer shrilled upwards. She reached the station and ran under the tunnel. Her shoes sent echoes ringing. She was in time. She reached the booking office and felt for her purse.

Then fortune struck and stunned her.

It was gone. She sought for it again, her fingers burrowed feverishly. Oh, God, there were only those two small, shallow pockets to search in. The purse was gone. She had lost it somewhere on the road. "Oh, God! Oh, God!" Nothing in her trembling fingers but a twisted glove without its fellow. The distant thunder of the train reached her. Her miserable eyes sought the sleepy boy behind the little window.

"I've lost my purse." She could hardly speak. "I'll give you my address, will you let me have a ticket to Waterloo?"

"Sorry," said the boy, "can't be done." Seeing her dishevelled hair he did not add "Miss." He walked back into his office.

She turned to the station-master, a gloomy, moustached figure blocking the doorway. She went towards him. "Tickets, please," he said. She said to him, "I've lost my purse. Can't you let me through? I'll send the money in the morning, you can have my address."

"Can't travel without a ticket," he said.

The rushing of the train sounded nearer.

"I beg of you," she said. "I assure you I will send the money." Under his moustache his mouth twisted cynically.

"Tickets, please," he said. The train roared in.

"I implore you," she cried, "for Christ's sake, for His mercy."

He said: "You can't travel without a ticket; so don't you try it on."

They were rolling the milk cans along the platform. There was a small stir and bustle and feet loud upon the flag-stones.

"I will send you the money. Oh, I beseech you ! I have lost it just on the road."

"Better go back and look for it."

"Will you keep the train, then ?"

"Not 'arf !" said the man.

They were calling "Right forward !" on the platform. The steam poured hissing from the boiler. It was nightmare, hideous nightmare. She fell on her knees, her beautiful hair unrolled along her shoulders.

"For the love of God," she cried, "let me come through."

"No," he said. "Clear out of here."

The train gave a series of sharp coughs. The chains jerked and the buffers thumped together. "There she goes," said the porters, as the train pulled out of the station. The station-master stamped out on to the platform and watched the tail-lights disappear.

Nelly, kneeling on the dusty floor of the booking-office, groped with numb fingers for her hairpins.

Her body seemed filled with lead. She grew conscious at last that the boy in the booking-office was regarding her with a stare fuller of curiosity than of kindness. She picked herself up and walked out of the station and through the tunnel again. It seemed a long time since she had last been there. Her brain was paralysed. She could not think. She was too miserable to cry.

Mechanically she mounted the hill, looking for her purse. She could not see it. She must have dropped it somewhere near the house. She reached the crest of the hill. Oh, if only she could find her purse. She strained her eyes for it. She could not see it. Only the bare cross-roads lay deathly under the moon. At the fork a sign-post spread spectral arms.

Nelly moved towards it and read in the still white glare, "London, 27 miles."

There lay her way then, that deserted and unpitying highroad. Its silence filled her with a strained, agonized attention. She held to the sign-post momentarily for support. What was that? She listened, quivering with apprehension. "Hush," said the little wind, moving in the tree-tops.

Nelly had all a child's terror of darkness and the townsman's dread of loneliness as well. She faced the empty road as a mariner in a shipwreck might face the menacing waters of the sea. Then she drew a long breath as if she were about to dive, and set her purpose before her and controlled the shaking of her limbs.

She began to walk swiftly, determinedly in the direction of London. The sign-post, bleached as a skeleton, seemed to watch her out of sight.

The road beyond Otterbridge runs out across low hills, the Ridges, where gorse and heather desolately take the place of hedged fields and friendly roofs, and gardens. Nelly had never been so far. She had never walked much at all. She had been neither rich nor poor enough all her life to harden her muscles. She walked with hasty, fretful eagerness and short steps. She knew before she had gone three miles that she had been rash and ill-considerate, but she kept on.

Out there, among the black levels of the Ridges, a thousand devils lurked. The narrowed night horizon held no promise of an end.

As she descended each hollow the mist rose to her breast like lapping water. She was seized with rending doubts lest she had misread the sign-post and was walking away from her goal. As the wooded hills fell away from her the sense of helplessness and danger became almost unbearable. She was conscious of horror at her heels. Her hair became rigid, and the vertebræ of her spine thrilled and pained her till she longed to scream. She became with imaginings almost unconscious. She changed her path from the resounding road to the grass. She flitted, one with the ghostly wayfarers of the night, by the edge of the track. She walked quickly and her feet made no noise. Her head was bare and her long hair streaming. She was as strange an apparition as any other by the light of the moon.

Half-way towards Marbury the Ridges rise to a considerable height. Facing the steep ascent of the road in the heavy shadow of the hill, she heard voices singing on the far side. They were loud

voices, men's voices, wavering and uncontrolled. Her vague horrors were replaced by a definite fear, but she moved onward swiftly. She was too stupefied with emotion to have thought of hiding herself or of any action indeed, but to follow the London road. The hill rose above her, the moon resting the edge of its bright disc upon it. Against this surface two silhouettes appeared. A tall man with a wooden leg and a shorter one that moved nimbly. Their clothes hung ragged about them, and flapped torn edges in the moonlight. As they walked they swayed inwards and outwards, separating and colliding together with the movements of a concertina, and as they staggered they howled.

Nelly advanced swiftly, silently to meet them. They lurched down upon her, and the big man gulped, "Give us a kiss." She saw herself for a moment made captive, caught by the nimble fellow, dragged in hideous strugglings to the big one. But she walked on. She did not swerve an inch or turn her head or speak. Fear gave to her shoulders a slightly raised appearance, the rigidity of her body made her sinister.

The roisterers stood agape. Then one of them said, "Oh, Jesus!" and started to run. Their big boots clattered riotously down the hill.

Nelly walked on. She did not run till she was down the further slope. She judged they would guess her mortal, and follow if they saw her running.

When she was well away she began to walk again. The reality of danger had somehow knocked the fear out of her bones. She identified herself with the mysteries of night. Her silence

gave her a fantastic pleasure. She began to enjoy the short grass under her foot. She was almost happy. She was conquering destiny.

At the end of the Ridges came a pine wood, and in a perfumed warmth she heard a nightingale singing. The notes made a little rippling brook of sound in the still branches. She and the bird of love were waking the night together. She was swept with tenderness and pity for herself, and she thought of Anthony and her journey's end. She walked bravely.

Near Marbury the woods began again, and the road ran through a deep ravine of oak and hazel. Here it was so dark that she could barely trace her way. The roadside grass was long and cool as water about her ankles. She walked through it. It refreshed her. In the darkness a big man tramped past her, a gamekeeper going his round. She caught the long gleam of his gun-barrel.

A gruff "good-night" jumped at her. She did not answer. In the darkness he thought it was a man went by.

So through Marbury, with the moon glimmering between the branches and the fields white with mist, and on to Altringham, the steep little village above the common, and there the moon set. It was two o'clock in the morning. Darkness swathed the world like a cloak. She found a sign-post on the common where the road to Weybridge crosses here, running east and west, but it was too dark to read it. She dared not go forward without its guidance. She sat down beside it to wait.

She was tired and her feet hurt her. She leaned her back against the post. Her eyes closed. The

delicious warmth that heralds sleep stole over her weary body. For awhile she dozed.

She leapt wide awake, her eyes staring. The common, the surrounding woods, the spire above them, every blade of grass, every stone in the road was lit up with a relentless illumination. For a moment she thought the moon had risen again, then that it lightened. But the illumination grew. She looked behind her and saw the shadow of the sign-post and her own shadow shoot out and bar the ground for half-a-mile away. Then she heard the drone of a motor approaching from the west. It was her opportunity. She read the sign-post, "London, 18 miles." She had made barely a third of the way then, but she was on the right road. The motor changed its gear with a loud grating sound, and humming busily turned to the left towards London. She followed in its wake. She wished she had asked for a lift along the road, and hurried after it, but it drew away from her smoothly, rapidly, and soon its humming was merged into the silence. While she held it in sight it was company. She felt her loneliness again when it was gone. The darkness was impenetrable.

Tears rose to her eyes. She felt outcast from her fellows. She knew she could not hold up her head before hard eyes and sharp tongues. She went forward doggedly.

The road led up to a high plateau and lay between low hedges and open fields. The air grew colder. A little wind stirred and freshened it. It made a soft whispering on each side of her. She was passing through cornfields. Her skirt and coat all at once were damp with dew. She noticed the

rich smell rising from the ground. She passed a walled garden sweet with stocks, and a wide, grassy plain fragrant with briar. She heard the shrill, sad cries of owls. The road dipped. She was engulfed in darkness. Then it rose again, and towards her floated the enervating odour of meadow-sweet. To her right she saw spreading fields, and a tree suddenly clear and defined, outlined in pale grey, thrust up among them. The sky grew leaden. Twittering bird voices awoke in the branches. A cock sent its raucous voice across the meadows, another answered it, another and another. The eastern sky became stained with pale bright red and yellow and with green. The bird voices grew louder. It was dawn.

The landscape seemed to drink in colour. The drab fields became green. Nelly realized of a sudden that she was desperately hungry. Empty and tired almost to exhaustion, she came into the little town of Woodford. No one was awake yet, the curtains in the windows were all drawn close, the shutters were up. It gave the place a coffined, funereal air. The market-square was empty. By the horse-trough some sparrows pecked the grains neglected in their yesterday's feast. The town-hall, ethereal in the delicate rosy light, showed a new-gilded clock face. The time was 4.15.

She got a drink of water from the fountain erected, so its inscription said, to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee. She bathed her face too as well as she could and rinsed her hands. A fine sight for well-conducted housewives, had any been awake. But there was no one to spy upon her, and she dried herself with the loose hems of her

blouse and plaited back the long yellow scarf of her hair. So she came to the next sign-post, a little worn but not disconsolate, and read, "London, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  miles."

Beyond Woodford the road was lightly wooded again. She saw cows lying in the fields, and once a rabbit scurried just ahead of her along the ditch. She walked slowly now. A farmhouse cat slid across the road, going home from its hunting.

She was tired and hungry. Her feet were sore. The sole of one of her cheap shoes was loose, and flapped uncomfortably. She realized that she was grimy with dust and the night mists. Her spirits sank low again. She would never arrive in time. On the hill outside Pemlow village she sat down by the roadside from sheer fatigue. Opposite her a milestone read: "London 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  miles," there was no mention of Otterbridge or Marbury upon it. She sat staring at it. She heard a clock strike six. She held her sore foot in her hand. A dog came and barked at her from behind a fence. Tears welled to her eyes and overflowed upon her cheeks. She wondered what would become of her.

Her despair was interrupted by a sound of men and horses, the clattering of hoofs and the creaking of wheels. Groaning and swaying, a wain, loaded with flower and fruit boxes, drawn tandem-wise, mounted the hill. The horses stopped a moment to breathe, the carter, whip in hand, mopping his brow. At this moment he caught sight of Nelly's grief-stricken figure bowed under her yellow hair.

"Like a lift?" he shouted. She raised her tear-smirched face. "Going to London?" She nodded voicelessly. "Like a lift?" She pulled herself

stiffly to her feet. "Oh, thank you." "Climb on, then." She moved to the wain and stood beside it. For her life she could not have scrambled on to it, she felt as if she had been kicked all over. "Here," shouted the man, "give us a hand." At his voice a sleepy boy on the top of the boxes roused himself and stretched down his hand to her. She caught hold of it. The carter boosted her, she reached the top of the wain.

"Now then, young Albert," shouted the driver, "make room for the lady, can't you." Albert, grinning self-consciously, made a place for her upon the sacking; it was warm from his grimy person, but she was too weary to care about that. Her head sank back into its greasy malodorousness, her legs hung down swaying with the motion of the wain. She fell asleep.

She was awakened by consciousness of a loud voice talking. "Jarge," it said, "I reckon as she's run away from schewl." She did not open her eyes, but through the lashes perceived Albert reclining near her addressing the back of the carter, who from his high seat was driving. Evidently they were conjecturing who she might be. She opened her eyes wide and saw they were still in the country, but the fields displayed large boards with ugly advertisements on them, and notices of land to sell, and instead of cottages were hideous rows of red-brick boxes with slate roofs. They were getting near London.

The carter glanced down at her, and she smiled up at him.

"It is kind of you to help me along like this."

The carter, confused before her beauty, blushed

to the ears and murmured something ending with "a good turn."

"I was feeling just done," said Nelly. "I've been walking all night."

"Thought you looked as if you'd been in for something."

"Yes," said Nelly. "I lost my purse and couldn't go by train, so I started to walk. It is most important that I should get to London soon. What time shall we be in, do you think?"

"You're safe enough here," said the carter. He was incredulous of anything, save that she was some sort of fugitive.

"Yes, indeed," said Nelly; and then a little anxiously, "But what time do you reckon to arrive?"

The man considered. "We did ought to be in Covent Garden by half-past six by rights, but we're behind this morning. I dunno what time it is by right, but I reckon we won't be in much afore nine."

A horse had lost a shoe. That was the cause of their lateness. She thanked her good angel. She would be in time.

So they creaked on through the squalid fields and the dreary suburbs. Presently she saw milk-men going their rounds and a postman rat-tatting smartly at closed doors. A servant-maid appeared shaking a duster, and another further on cleaning some steps. The city wore an unaccustomed air, a delicacy, a cleanliness. The sky was a clear turquoise over it, the shadows were transparent.

The carter told her that his boxes contained flowers and vegetables for the London market. It

wouldn't matter much being late, he said, there were always plenty of buyers, and anyhow that was not his business, and it wasn't his fault. He came from beyond Woodford. She had walked through there that morning, and did he know the Ridges. He'd a brother living near there. He'd been there sometimes of a Sunday. She had walked over them that night. "And I wasn't half-scared." He'd bet she was.

Chatting friendlily they arrived at the outlying tram-lines. Nelly wished she could have left him there and gone ahead in a fleet tram to the Embankment, but she hadn't a penny. The lumbering of the wain filled her with impatience.

They crawled through Clapham and over Waterloo Bridge. The streets were already busy with black-clothed clerks and girls going to their work. Their early morning trimness made her conscious of her strange and unkempt appearance. She began to have misgivings as to what Anthony would think of her. The toil of her journey had for the most part kept him out of her thoughts. Would he welcome her, tired and filthy and with broken shoes? She thought he would. She would not have the courage to call at Miss Cluer's for her clothes, even if she had time. She would just catch Tony and explain the situation and he'd give her some more money, and when she had had a bath and breakfast somewhere, she'd get dressed properly and join him at Dover.

Anthony would laugh to hear how she had ridden into London with the flowers. He would say delightful things to her about her company of roses and lilies and love-in-a-mist. And she would say

quite truthfully, "Oh, but you couldn't know they were there. They were all in cases. You couldn't see them even through the slats. Or smell them either for the sacking!" And he would laugh and say perhaps, "But the flowers knew you were there." How thrilling it would be to be seated opposite him again and to see his eyes fixed upon her in affectionate mockery and with that intimate smile that made her cheeks grow hot. Her heart began to beat in great throbs. She forgot her tiredness, she forgot the night and its terrors, she forgot the future and its uncertainties, she remembered only that she was going to her lover, that she was going to the dearest thing in the world. Her eyes grew misty with love and her throat strained.

They reached Wellington Street as St. Martin's chimed the quarter to nine. Its bells floated beautifully upon her. She asked the carter to put her down. She ran along the Strand.

She forgot to say good-bye or thank you to the carter. All her exhausted energies were concentrated on reaching the boat-train platform before the clock struck nine. Sometimes she ran a few steps, sometimes she walked. The loose sole of her shoe dragged at her, the soreness of her feet made her limp. Everywhere her eyes ranged for clocks as she hurried on. Seven minutes to nine said one, eight minutes said another. A public-house said nine o'clock, a watchmaker's wares said five different things.

At three minutes to nine she was outside the station. In through the first archway she ran on to the broad-paved space full of perambulating

baggage and unhurrying voyagers. She came to the gateway. Would they stop her? "Seeing someone off?" asked the inspector. Speechless she nodded. He passed her through. The boat-train was unmistakably before her, every door shut, every window full of vacant pink ovals, faces, faces, but not the one that her eyes sought. Groups on the platform at every door were smiling in at the windows. "One more minute," said somebody outside to somebody within. She began her limping run again. Boys with newspapers and chocolates got in her way, empty trucks hampered her. The train began to move. Where was he? Where was he? The train was moving out. It was impossible. She was dreaming. It hadn't happened. She quickened her pace, keeping level with the moving train. At the same moment in a carriage just ahead of her she caught sight of Anthony's face. He was looking past her, at the ground, without a sign of recognition. The carriage slid out on the naked metals. The platform was empty. She was watching the tail of the vanishing train. He had not seen her.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### TEMPTATION AND FALL OF MISS FITCH

EIGHT o'clock in the morning is not a particularly pleasant hour for going to call on one's friends, but it was at that hour that Hilda, hatless, breathless and breakfastless, presented herself at The Height. A little pink-clad maid with a leather was polishing the brass and glass of the front door. She gaped when she saw Hilda.

"Is anyone down yet? Could I see Miss Fitch, do you think, or Mrs. Arden?"

The little maid left her post. "I'll just inquire, Miss," and Hilda could hear her shrill appeals to a higher power grow muffled towards the kitchen: "Mr. Farrow! Mr. Farrow!"

It gave a strangely disorganized feeling to encounter the butler, when he presently appeared, unshaved as yet and negligent as to his collar.

No one was down. In fact, no one was expected before nine o'clock. The trays with the morning teas were only just going up. Hilda caught sight of a housemaid that she knew mounting the stairs.

"I'll go up with the tea, then," she said.

She followed the swinging, starched skirt down the corridor, with its monotonous closed doors. Outside one of them she recognized Steven Young's boots, and the sight gave her a small feeling of intimacy.

"Do go to Miss Fitch's room first, please," she said to the housemaid. How dead the house seemed!

The maid knocked smartly and entered at once a door on their left. It was so strange to be entering a bedroom at that hour, to see the drawn curtains barring the sunlight, the tumbled bed. It gave an impression of sickness, of something wrong.

Miss Fitch was too sleepy to express surprise.

"Why, my dear," she said, stretching thin arms above her head, "this is an early visit!"

"I've come to breakfast with you; may I?" Hilda's face was obviously anxious.

"That will be delightful. We'll have it up here. Rose!" she recalled the housemaid, "let us have a tray up here as soon as breakfast is ready, please. And now, dear!" She turned to Hilda.

How strange it all was! Everything seemed topsy-turvy! Miss Fitch with her hair tumbled, helpless among pillows! Chaos where all had been bright and orderly! Hilda moved her hands with a sudden gesture of despair.

"It's Nelly," she said.

"What—what has happened?"

"She has gone," said Hilda.

"Gone?"

"She has gone away with Mr. Hamel." The words broke from Hilda with a sort of sob, and with the sound of them there surged up in her a sense of desolation that was almost unbearable.

"My dear!" exclaimed Miss Fitch, and sat up straight in bed. "When did you find out? My dear, how frightful! There must be a mistake!"

Tony has never—— But such a way to do it!"

Exclamations and questions came pouring on Hilda.

"I thought she had given it up! I told her I'd tell Mrs. Hamel if she went on with it. Pandolesky told me of it first. They've been meeting and meeting here in the studio for ever so long. Oh, I have been an abject fool!"

"My child, you couldn't help it."

"It is so *horrible* of them!"

So horrible of them to let the beast come into what had been the veriest flower-garden. For a brief instant she pictured in her mind's eye Nelly's smooth arms about the neck, Nelly's yellow hair against the breast of Anthony's white jersey. It stirred the deep jealous anger within her.

"It's so *horrible* of them!"

"Tell me, tell me, when did she go?"

"After the party last night. She wanted to catch the last train up to town. I said she shouldn't. We rowed about it and I locked her into her room. She must have climbed out of the window."

"She must have been desperate."

"She was mad. She didn't know what she was doing. I was sure if she had time she wouldn't be so wicked. I thought everything would be right again by this morning—once Tony had gone."

"Poor girl! Poor girl! She must have loved him desperately."

"Then she oughtn't to have loved him. What right had she to love him? We were all so happy before she came!"

Miss Fitch looked at her flushed cheeks and

tear-bright eyes for a moment. Then she said decisively—

“It’s no use blaming people. If anyone is to blame it is Anthony. He should have contented himself with being adored.”

Here was very much to talk about.

“Go over, like a dear, and fetch Mrs. Arden. She’ll be dressed by now. Her room is nearly opposite.”

Hilda went over and fetched her.

Mrs. Arden was engaged in brushing her hair. She looked very girlish with it down her back, and she came across to Miss Fitch at once in the prettiest of morning wrappers.

“Well, this is an early hour for a conference!” she began gaily; and then, with a change of voice, “Has anything happened?”

They told her.

The three feminine faces wore a strained and tragic look.

“Out of the window!” said Mrs. Arden. She seemed to be more horrified at that than at any other part of the narration.

“Oh, the fewer morals people have the more windows they climb out of,” said Miss Fitch impatiently. “It’s a gift.”

“I made sure she was fast asleep when I got no answer, and I didn’t go near her room again till this morning. It’s been going on for months and months, Pandolefsky told me. I couldn’t believe him at first, but there were lots of little things. Oh, I ought never to have brought her here!”

“Can’t they be stopped?” asked Mrs. Arden,

as if athirst for action, but seating herself for a good long colloquy on the side of the bed.

"What good would that do?" asked Miss Fitch. "We're not her guardians." She lifted her shoulders.

"Of course, he'll marry her," said Hilda.

They both turned to her at once.

"Oh, that's impossible!"

"Out of the question!"

"Out of the question? Why out of the question?"

"Anthony isn't free, my dear."

"Well, he could be divorced, couldn't he?"

The two older women looked at one another and smiled.

"It doesn't rest with him, you see."

"You mean Mrs. Hamel would have to divorce him?"

"Well, yes, if she wanted to."

"I don't see," said Hilda grandly, "how any woman can stick to a man when he shows he doesn't want her."

"*Noblesse oblige.* But aren't we talking of rather remote possibilities? Anthony may not want to be divorced."

"Oh, he cannot be such a brute as that!" Hilda burst out.

"My dear child, don't let's call names. We must face the facts. Anthony is a perfectly charming fellow. Abusing him only confuses things."

"Besides," said Mrs. Arden, "we know perfectly well that Erica is not the sort of woman who abdicates."

"Even if Anthony has ceased to want her. You

can't divide people's emotions like pineapple chunks." Miss Fitch was precise.

"But don't you think he ought to marry her?" cried Hilda, in hurt amazement.

"I think it would be very unsuitable," said Miss Fitch. "Here comes breakfast."

"But, Janet, the girl is so young," said Mrs. Arden when the door had closed again. "I feel we're in some way responsible too, Hilda. Janet is an utter cynic, but I feel we ought to make some effort."

"Oh, Anthony is sure to treat her well. I shall not cease to maintain that he's a charming fellow," said Miss Fitch, beginning to butter her toast.

"But I thought you were fond of Nelly," said Hilda limply.

"So I was; so I am," Miss Fitch's teeth met on the toast; "but I'm fond of Anthony as well; also of our friend Erica."

"I like them all, too," said Hilda. "Oh, what am I to think about it?"

Her anger had gone. She could hardly believe that she had felt it.

"I wish we had married her to Edward Armour," said Mrs. Arden. "I suppose this is why she refused him?" She put whole worlds of meaning into the "this."

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

"Still," said Hilda at last, "we haven't decided what we are to do."

"Do!" said Miss Fitch. "My dear, what can we do? Do nothing!"

They went on with breakfast.

"How are we going to treat him when he comes back?" asked Mrs. Arden diffidently.

"'Sufficient for the day,'" said Miss Fitch, helping herself to marmalade. "It's very bad manners to discuss one's host like this. Perhaps he won't come back at all. Perhaps they'll both be drowned. Perhaps they'll disappear like the Austrian Archduke and live happily ever after. I shan't go half-way to meet trouble."

"That's all very fine, Janet," said Mrs. Arden, "but you know perfectly well that he will come back; and what are you going to do then?"

"I shall treat him as I've always treated him. Gracious mercy alive! he may have done this sort of thing a score of times without our knowing anything about it. I shall be very glad to see him. You don't want me to take him aside and lecture him, do you?"

"But what will have happened to Nelly?"

Hilda's hurt cry struck in upon them.

"My dear, I might say that she should have thought of that before she started, but I'm not so bad as that. The end of her adventure won't bear thinking about."

"But if he loves her?"

"As long as he does that she will be all right."

This was reassuring, but it was a little dull.

"So we are going to do nothing," said Mrs. Arden, disappointed. "Don't you think Erica ought to know?"

"'Lead us not into temptation!'" ejaculated Miss Fitch. "What good would that do?"

"We might persuade her to divorce him," said Hilda.

Miss Fitch glanced into the eyes of Mrs. Arden. They were loath to see so many dramatic possibilities departing on tiptoe. It was such an irresistible scene to imagine—Hilda making her appeal to that little porcelain image of perfection. The wish to thrust a dart of emotion into a being superciliously above such things—sheer love of mischief—doubt and desire alternated skippingly in Miss Fitch's brain. If it was serious Erica must know sooner or later—if not, what harm?

Miss Fitch fell.

"Perhaps Hilda ought to tell her. She will certainly be annoyed if she finds out in a casual sort of way—"

Miss Fitch balanced hesitating at the prospect.

"Oh, really," said Hilda, "I don't think I could do that. I'd much rather you would. You would know so much better than I should what to say." Her eyes appealed from one face to the other. Miss Fitch and Mrs. Arden looked judicial.

Then Miss Fitch said, with an air of great reasonableness—

"We must try and put ourselves in Erica's place. To hear of this little indiscretion of Tony's from *you* is to hear of it from the fountain-head. If, on the other hand, *I* were to tell her she might ask—and positively I think she would be justified—why all the world should know of it before her?"

Hilda wriggled her shoulder-blades.

"Why need she know at all?" she asked.

"Surely," said Mrs. Arden, "it is only right that she should? To hide a thing like this doesn't seem quite straight—does it?"

"It depends which side you take, doesn't it?" asked Hilda.

"Oh! sides!" exclaimed Miss Fitch.

"I always take the woman's side," said Mrs. Arden sentimentally.

"But which *is* the woman's side?" cried Hilda.

Miss Fitch laughed. "Hilda has scored," she said. "In this case you will have to make division of yourself. For my own part, I am incurably an onlooker. But if you do really take the woman's side—" she addressed Mrs. Arden—"you must take the girl's, for she at least is flesh and blood."

"And the other is only a doll—a doll stuffed with steel-filings," said Hilda, rising up. "I shall go to her and say to her—What on earth shall I say to her?"

"You will think of something once you begin," they encouraged her.

Mrs. Arden put an arm round her waist and squeezed her lovingly. She had given them such an interesting morning.

"We'll meet in the garden," said Miss Fitch, "and hear how Erica takes it. I shall dress at once."

"So will I," said Mrs. Arden.

"Good luck, dear."

The thing was settled. Whatever "sides" they took, she was to be sacrificed to make a feminine holiday. She would do her best for Nelly now. She found herself solitary in the corridor.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### MRS. HAMEL TURNS DOWN HER THUMB

THE door of Mrs. Hamel's boudoir, from which her bedroom led, faced the top of the stairs. Hilda had never entered it without a certain tightening of the throat in prelude to that formidable little lady. Now it was with a comical sense of relief, seeing how near the interview was and in any case inevitable, that she heard the maid asking her to wait in the boudoir a little while.

It was a small, many-sided room, filled with early sunshine and the smell of carnations. Through the bright windows fifty miles of exquisite country formed its south wall. The other walls were panelled with painted silk, and among blurred flowers and knotted ribbons nymphs and shepherds enjoyed a perpetual festival. The little writing-table, where no one ever disturbed the pens, had been Marie Antoinette's. The satin-wood china cupboards filling the corners might have been Jane Austen's. On the mantelpiece two green parrots watched with their china eyes. Between them, flanked by painted bowls and silver candlesticks, stood a clock surrounded with gilt and set in crystal. It did not tick because Mrs. Hamel did not like that noise. Its motionless hands drew Hilda's eyes to them again and again, and each

time the sight of them gave her a sense of irritation. "Three minutes to four," they registered.

She strolled about the room, drawing comfort from the daintiness and charm of it. How perfect and how quiet it was. It was like a fan, a painted fan that hangs upon a wall. It had just such an air of aloofness and inutility. She thought to herself, "The right setting for a fan is a graceful woman, not a flat white mount. But perhaps there are no women delicate enough now to handle a painted fan. Mrs. Hamel could handle one. Why can't she handle this, then? I might be in a museum!"

She rested her thumbs in the pockets of her jacket and pursed her mouth in noiseless whistling. "It's not alive," she thought. "It's all under a glass case, and it's stopped." It pleased her to be defying it with her tweed coat and walking shoes. Why had she been so angry with Nelly? Had it been all jealousy? Perhaps. Well, now she was happy again and feeling as she ought to feel. Nelly was ruined for certain, but Hilda was elevated almost to enjoyment by the pity and terror of the tragedy. She was Nelly's champion through thick and thin. There was an heroic glow in her cheeks when Mrs. Hamel's maid came to usher her into the presence.

Mrs. Hamel lay in her great pink-canopied bed facing the door. She wore a little Dutch cap of lace upon her head and seemed very frail among the pillows. She was engaged in polishing her nails with a silk handkerchief. She did not cease this occupation as Hilda came in, but smiled her shallow little smile and said—

"Come and sit beside me. Not on the bed, please, that chair. Now we can talk. Are you glad to be going home?"

"Yes," Hilda said, she was glad, she would like seeing the familiar places again. It was nearly a year that she had been away. "I shall be very sorry to leave here, though," she added.

How was she to begin?

"You must come and stay with us when we are settled in again. You know I go this afternoon, too. How exhausting these last days have been!" Mrs. Hamel paused between each sentence. She drooped her hands languidly. Why could not Hilda see she was tired and thank her for her great kindness and all that, and go?

"I shall never forget your kindness," the girl was saying.

"Well? Well?"

Mrs. Hamel gave a keen look at her. She was sitting in that chair as if she meant to sit there all day.

Mrs. Hamel tried a long pause. At the end of it she said—

"You are very quiet. Not that breakfast is the liveliest time ever, and I simply hate people at this hour of the morning." Then, feeling that she had not been as polished as usual, she added in a voice of the flattest indifference and as if suppressing a yawn, "How's your friend the circus rider? Does she go too?"

A light of battle gleamed in Hilda's eye.

"She has gone," she said. "She has jumped through the last hoop and ridden out of the arena."

"Oh," said Mrs. Hamel. Hilda was not usually allusive. "What has she done?"

"She has done something very desperate indeed, I am sorry to say," said Hilda.

"I am sure there is a man in it!" cried Mrs. Hamel gleefully.

"There is," said Hilda significantly. "That is what I came to see you about."

"My dear Hilda," exclaimed Mrs. Hamel, "it is no use asking me to interfere. I simply cannot take the responsibility of meddling. It's not that I wish your friend any harm, but I honestly don't see what good I could do her. It's a case of temperament. I knew from the moment I saw her that sooner or later there would be something like this."

"Did you really know that?" asked Hilda rather sardonically.

"Perhaps I should not say that I *knew*. I certainly felt it. It is the fashion now to pretend that women have no intuition, but that is all nonsense. I have known things instinctively again and again. I never liked the girl and I never expected anything good of her. I am sorry for your sake, Hilda, because you must feel responsible in a way, and you know I warned you from the beginning." She became quite animated with the rightness of her prophecy.

"Yes, Mrs. Hamel, I know you did," said Hilda. "That's what makes me feel it all the more."

"Well, we have to buy experience, all of us," said Mrs. Hamel. "Thank goodness, she could not influence you in any way. Another time you will realize, perhaps, that there is such a thing as

"introduction," and though it is old-fashioned and conventional it has its uses, and you won't be so ready to pick up chance strangers and make bosom friends of them. We all have to buy experience. Of course, I am very *sorry* it has happened." Her voice rang triumphantly. Not often does the whirligig of time bring in its revenges so that every one can appreciate them.

"Dear Mrs. Hamel," said Hilda, "you don't know yet what *has* happened."

"I am not at all sure that I want to know," said Mrs. Hamel. "I don't care particularly for squalid stories. I can guess very well."

"You cannot guess," said Hilda gravely, "or you wouldn't talk like that."

"Really, Hilda," said Mrs. Hamel, "don't talk to me as if you were my grandmother. It is no use asking me to *sympathize* with the creature, if that is what you mean."

Hilda made a gesture of despair. There was something so childish about Mrs. Hamel at that moment. Her sophistication seemed stripped from her. She appeared to Hilda as a small, raw, stupid thing that had to be hurt.

"I am asking you to sympathize with yourself," she said brutally. "I am trying to sympathize with you."

It was odious, but it was direct.

Mrs. Hamel looked at her for a full minute.

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked at last, and then: "It isn't Tony?"

"I am very sorry," said Hilda.

The woman in the bed seemed to have subsided. Hilda wished she could have got away without

witnessing her humiliation. Why had she told? She had been a fool to let them make her tell.

Then a pale voice said—

“I don’t believe it,” and again more confidently, “I don’t believe it,” and then with something of her old asperity, “I am quite sure, Hilda, that you are wrong.”

“I wish I could be,” said the girl miserably.

“Who told you?” asked Mrs. Hamel.

“I saw for myself,” said Hilda, “and in the end Nelly told me herself.”

“You did not hear of it from my husband, I presume?”

The voice was sarcastic.

“He thought no one knew but themselves.”

“I see. You heard it from that girl. My good Hilda, you must know that the best men in the country are libelled in that fashion, and worse, every day of the year. Her mind is corrupt. She is lying. She is hysterical,” said Mrs. Hamel.

Hilda flushed to anger.

“It is so, Mrs. Hamel,” she said, “they’ve loved each other a long time. I was going to tell you a week ago, but I thought—I thought—”

“What did you think?”

“I thought it was all over. I made her promise to give him up. I ought to have stopped her.”

“Stopped her!” cried Mrs. Hamel; “how absurdly you talk. If she wanted to go you should have let her go. What possible business could it be of yours?”

“She is my friend. I ought to have taken care of her.”

“To save her from the ravenings of my husband.

See how absurd it is, my dear Hilda. He looked upon her as a child, a child."

Hilda shook her head.

"He expected her to meet him in town to-day. She got out of the window last night to join him. I locked her in her room."

"Well, if she chose to make a fool of herself you couldn't prevent her."

"I thought if Mr. Hamel——"

"Oh, don't bring him into it, *please*."

Hilda stared at her. "But how——"

"It has nothing whatever to do with my husband. I believe you to have been misinformed."

Hilda was staggered.

"But if it is proved to you?"

"It can not be proved to me. It's preposterous, and I decline to believe it."

"You must believe what you choose," said Hilda wearily. She rose from her chair. "I wish I hadn't told you. Good-bye."

But Mrs. Hamel was as eager to keep the girl as before she had been to get rid of her.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she ran away last night and I don't know where she went."

"She hasn't gone to America?"

"I don't know."

Mrs. Hamel burst into a sudden angry gaiety.

"To America! Oh, that's too hideously comical. I don't think people, however infatuated, would elope to America. They'll be held up at Ellis

Island ! They'll be deported ! Oh, it's all nonsense, Hilda, it's all nonsense."

"Oh, Mrs. Hamel, it isn't nonsense."

"Don't keep saying things like that. They vex me. I can't imagine why you should tell me at all ?"

"I meant—Nelly was my friend—I thought perhaps—if you knew—that you'd set him free ?"

"Set him free ?" Mrs. Hamel's eyes were very bright. "If what you say is true he seems to have a considerable share of freedom, as it is. What more do they want ?"

"You won't divorce him ?"

"Do what ?" asked Mrs. Hamel.

Hilda hesitatingly pushed the word forward.

"Divorce him."

"My dear Hilda, have you taken leave of your senses ? Why, pray, should I divorce him ?"

"Well, I thought," Hilda stammered lamely, her fiery speeches had somehow been effectively quenched. "I thought if a man wanted to be free—if it had happened to me—I mean—I should let him go if he wanted to."

"How quite extraordinary. You speak as if a man should be divorced for wanting to be. He has no right to wish to be free, don't you understand that ?"

"Yes, but if he does ? And besides, Nelly——"

"She did not consider me before running away with him, why should I consider her now ?"

"It would be kind. It would be the only decent thing to do."

"Decent ! To divorce, decent !"

It was magnificent, it was superb. She went on—

“Besides, how do you know he wants his freedom? The girl has thrown herself at his head. He should surely have some chance of changing his mind. Men are so weak. They are led by their passions. But because a man has the misfortune to conceive an infatuation for a low, vulgar woman, that should hardly be a reason for casting him off altogether. It might ruin him utterly. It would be merciless, uncharitable!”

Now it was in something of this strain that Hilda's own thoughts were racing, but they advocated by a strange coincidence the case for a divorce.

Mrs. Hamel went on—

“If my husband tells me himself that he loves another woman, if he asks me to set him free, I might do so, but I should have to regard the case in all its aspects and use my wisdom to help his troubled mind. After all, there is such a thing as religion, Hilda. Clearly if it is right for a woman to cleave to her husband while all is well with him, it should be doubly her duty to stay by him when he has sinned? But Tony has said nothing to me of this, and as he has not told me it seems dishonourable for me to know. Therefore I shall try and ask God to give me the power—” her voice shook for a moment—“to put what you have told me from my mind. As to the girl, her rights, her sufferings, are between herself and the man for whom she has so sadly forgotten herself. I could not help her if I would. My duty is to my husband. Even if I did not love him he would have this claim on me. I must try to save him

from himself. My heart and conscience both teach me what to do, and I shall do it."

She sank back among the pillows, a faint flush lighting her face. She was certainly more difficult to conquer than Hilda had supposed.

"That means you will do nothing?" the girl asked.

Mrs. Hamel closed her eyes in sign of assent. This had the secondary effect of ending the interview.

Hilda turned to go.

"Good-bye," she said, "I am sorry for having disturbed you."

The Beauty made no reply.

Hilda moved through the boudoir and out into the corridor, reflecting that obedience to one's conscience and the sweetness of revenge do not usually live in so much harmony together.

## CHAPTER XXV

### FLATNESS

SHE might as well go down to Elkins's and pack, thought Hilda. The great house with the pale morning shadows reminded her of a school during the holidays. It had a desolate feeling. Already they had begun to shroud the gay furniture in white cerecloths. It was as if someone had died. She stepped slowly down the wide staircase. Should she seek out Miss Fitch and describe the interview? But she was in no mood for raillery. Oh, this being left behind!

Steven Young's voice broke in upon the silence.

"And what are you doing here at this hour?"

He was very fresh-looking, with ears pink from the bath, very domestic-looking with house-shoes on his feet. She had never seen him before except with shiny pumps or walking shoes.

Her sad eyes travelled up and met his.

"You don't mean to say you're going away at this hour? This is a general dissolution."

"I'm going down the hill to pack."

"Come and help me eat my bacon first, and then I'll come and help you pack. Think how nice that will be."

"It's very tempting, but I've a train to catch."

They had reached the dining-room door.

"Do come in," he urged her, and pathetically,

"I'm so afraid of Farrow. Just think, I'm all alone. It's past ten o'clock. I shan't dare to let him know I'm down. I shall have to drink cold coffee."

"It's no use, my Steven; I am adamant. You'd better shake me warmly by the hand and say 'good-bye.'"

"Well, if you won't——" said Steven, opening the door. "But I'm not going to say 'good-bye' now. I'm coming to pack, you know."

He passed in through the door.

It was nice to have someone to be friends with; it was nice to be going home again. She was breathless all at once for whipping winds and waves with their teeth showing. She wanted them as another type of girl might want a shoulder to cry on.

Half-way down the hill she stopped for a moment and then went on again. It had just occurred to her that Steven expected to find Nelly at Elkins's. She had been thinking that everyone knew of the flight by this time.

In her present mood she felt no bitterness. It was natural that everyone should have fallen in love with Nelly. She had fallen in love with her herself at their first meeting. And it was, after all, only the hand that Steven Young had kissed!

Packing to go home! What a tame ending! What transformation had she imagined the year would accomplish? But here she was, just her own self, with the same brown hair and cheerful brown eyes, cramming her clothes into a box, her books, her boots; squeezing damp sponge and loofa, remembering her tooth-brush and hot-water

bottle, just as she had done on twenty other occasions when the unadventurous buzzing wheel of her life had spun her back to Ballygrawna.

Coming downstairs with more books (she was packing the bulk of her belongings in the sitting-room) she encountered Steven just entering the sunlit square of the door.

"Hullo!" he said. "What can I do to be useful?"

He took the books from her hands and began to read the names on the backs. "What a revolutionary collection! And a Maxwell's *Rebellion*. Is it illustrated?"

"If you really want to be useful," said Hilda, "you might write some labels."

Obediently he sat down to the table. She ran upstairs for more things. On her coming down again he asked—

"I say, where's Nelly?"

"She's gone."

She tried to hush all importance from her voice.

"Oh, but this is too rotten!" said Steven. "When did she go? I most particularly wanted to say good-bye to her. I don't even know where she lives." Then, catching sight of Hilda's embarrassed face: "Is anything wrong?"

"She climbed out of the window," said Hilda. "I locked her in her room, but she would go; nothing would stop her."

"But what possessed her—why should you lock her in her room? What's the matter?"

He was profoundly interested now.

"She didn't go alone, Steven. Oh, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Not alone! You mean she was going with someone." His head inclined in the direction of The Height. "You mean she was going with—" He left the name a blank, his jaw dropping.

"Oh, Steven, it's all so miserable. Everything is spoiled!" cried Hilda.

"No, it's not; no, it's not," said Steven testily. "Why should you say that?"

"It makes me feel so wretched."

"Me, too," said Steven. "Envy, I suppose; blighting jealousy, being left out. Cheer up, you fool!" He gave his chest a thump.

The summer day outside seemed to have gone cold.

"God give them happiness," he said lightly.

Mrs. Elkins rapped at the door and thrust her head round it.

"Might I speak to you a minute, Miss?" She advanced into the room as she continued: "One of the lads picked this up, Miss, down by the gate here. I made sure it was Miss Hayes's. Such a way to carry on—excuse me, Miss Concannon—climbing out of windows and running wild about the countryside; and not the first time either, I'll be bound."

Hilda took the small object from Mrs. Elkins, while the stream of eloquence continued—

"Idleness never did no good to anything—man, woman or beast," said Mrs. Elkins; "first day she come here I doubted she was up to no good. 'People don't look like that for nothing,' I thought to myself. 'That's no ordinary honest prettiness,' I thought; if you'll excuse me, Miss,

'tain't wholesome. I'm sorry for all the trouble she's caused you. It's my opinion she isn't worth it. I wouldn't say a word to worry Miss Con-cannon." She turned to Steven, standing gravely listening. "A nicer young lady I've never had to deal with. Not only as she doesn't ask for things she shouldn't have, but she don't ask for lots of things as she *should* have. Not that the other young lady was any trouble in the 'ouse; she was a trouble to my mind. I can't help seeing what's going on. I've eyes in my head same as other people."

There appeared to be no end to Mrs. Elkins's discourse. Hilda said—

"Thank you for bringing me this. I'll send it on to her. (If I only could!) We should give the boy something." She found her own bag and produced five shillings. When the door had closed she opened Nelly's purse. "There's quite a lot in it: over three pounds. She must have been wanting this."

Her face was pale with contrition. The result of her fit of morality appeared with what seemed an exaggerated ruthlessness.

"Where have they gone—do you know?" Steven's voice was hushed.

"To America, I suppose," said Hilda.

"Hardly," said Steven.

"Perhaps she'll write to me," said Hilda.

But even as she said it she knew that that would not happen. They looked at one another, conscious of their helplessness.

"I wish I hadn't tried to stop her," said Hilda, thinking aloud, "or that I'd succeeded."

She began to put some more things into the trunks.

"There's someone from The Height to speak to you," said Mrs. Elkins, rapping on the door. Her voice, robbed of its discourse, had a decided asperity about it.

Hilda found Mrs. Hamel's maid with a note.

"Madam was anxious you should have it, Miss Concannon. I was to give it into your hands myself."

Hilda thanked her and saw her away again.

The envelope contained two enclosures, one in Mrs. Hamel's green ink, saying, "You see you were wrong. But as you were wrong I forgive you"—a trivial matter thus dismissed—the other a telegram from Anthony which said: "Crossing *Majestic*, Southampton." It had been handed in at Dover.

Hilda and Steven studied it together.

"If you went to Southampton you might just catch them," she said.

"That was what I was thinking," said Steven; "if I would be any use."

"You could give her the purse. You could hear where she was going. You could tell her I was sorry for making an ass of myself."

Her eyes were dancing with animation. They had not reached the end yet by any means.

"Where's the ABC?"

Headlong they hunted, and found it—

"Waterloo—there must be a million trains. Here, if you caught the 12.45? But can you? No, you can't. Well, the 1.18, then. There's a good train that reaches Southampton soon

after four. Oh, Steven, wire to me—to Liverpool."

"I will," said Steven, "I will. But look here, I haven't a farthing—not enough to take me there and back." He dived his hands through his pockets.

"That doesn't matter," cried Hilda. "I've plenty of farthings. Thank God for my detestable father."

She thrust the money into his hand. He was out of the house. He was gone. He would manage it somehow. She would have an answer to her ravenous questionings.

The train moved smoothly, slowly into Lime Street. The lamps slid by in the darkness like beads pushed along a string. Hilda, leaning out of her window, searched the platform for the telegraph boy. There he was. "Concannon!" They were calling her name. She ripped open the pink envelope.

"A. alone," it said. "Going with him America. Steven."

That was all: the question; the answer. Turning, she began to take her baggage out of the rack.

## CHAPTER XXVI

LONDON—LONELINESS—THE DANGERS OF THE STREETS  
—THE ARM OF COINCIDENCE STRETCHING IN ALL  
DIRECTIONS—THE HAPPY ENDING

A WEST wind blowing half a hurricane caught Hilda as she emerged from the South Kensington Museum and blew her, together with some yellow leaves, down the steps and into the street. A tawny sunset shone on the wet pavements. The omnibuses ground by, spurting thick mud from under their clumsy wheels. It was London and it was February.

With the great mild wind pushing her, Hilda turned eastwards. She debated with herself whether she should take a 'bus or walk. There was no hurrying reason for taking a 'bus, but if she walked, she would not arrive at her rooms till after dark, and familiar as they were growing to her, she could not entirely banish a small quaking that she felt at their silence and faintly gleaming windows. She no longer groped for matches now as she used to at first, anticipating, in the pricking nerves of her spine, contact, perhaps, with the cold hand of a corpse, or with some running "leggy" thing, but it was still with an agonized awareness of the empty bedroom at her back or of a cupboard

with a watchful door that she scraped her "vesta" on the match-box and saw the green glare of the incandescent gas flood the room. The wet, brown streets, however, and the lamps showing primrose-coloured and ineffectual in the sunset, were too beautiful to leave. She buttoned her coat across under her chin and tugged her soft hat firmly above her eyes. Her leather wallet with some copyings she had made swung on her left wrist. Her hands were in her pockets. Head erect, stepping easily, she felt vigorous and alive. It filled her with elation to be marching across London like this when the rest of humanity was sittingindoors at its tea.

She and the wind seemed in harmony and travelling together. The moist air made little ringlets of the locks about her face, chilled her cheeks to rose-colour, set her eyes dancing. Independence had its charm as well as its terrors, and the charm was just now the greater. This walk of hers would enable her to make but one meal of tea and supper too, no small advantage when you have to do all your own "chars." How splendidly compact she felt, a small world in herself swinging through space.

Dusk drew down and clouds moved across the sunset. Now and again rain sprinkled. The 'buses roared by with lighted rain-spotted windows steamy with crowded breaths, damp clothing and umbrellas. It was better to be outside in the drizzle than in that. Six o'clock and pitch darkness found her at her own door.

Hilda's lodging was in a street that runs beside

the Tottenham Court Road. It was in a conspicuously "low" neighbourhood. The house door had no knocker upon it, the letter-box gaped hideously naked of brazen rim. It suggested to Hilda inevitably a toothless mouth eaten by disease. Rats might have gnawed it. At one side was a vertical row of dirty bell handles. A key inserted, the open door revealed a dirty hall lit by a head of gas in a wire cage, and immediately before the door a sunken square that had possibly in the remote past enclosed a door-mat. Now Hilda recklessly tramped over it to carry all the mud adhering to her shoes up the wooden stairs. Somewhere in the basement lived an old woman who on a Saturday would be found slopping them with dismal water.

Hilda's apartments were on the top floor and consisted of a tiny bedroom and a capacious studio, the two inter-communicating by a third door. The door of the bedroom faced the landing, but was kept permanently bolted upon the inside. The second door, the door of the studio, Hilda now unlocked herself. She was warm and pleasantly tired with walking. It was nice to be home again.

Having scrubbed her muddy shoes vigorously upon her own mat, she tip-toed across the floor and lit the gas, then the gas-fire and the ring under the kettle. That done she removed her gloves and drew the curtains. The room was comfortable and pretty. Thanks to the Concannon mills, she had been able to furnish it as she wished. Beside the door was the furnace, and a strong deal table stood beside it under the second window, the work-table.

On the other side of the door was the cupboard, whose creaking had often made her shudder. In the corner beside it hung a broom and a dustpan. Beside the bedroom door was a tall-boy chest, containing all her clothing and the things of her trade. The bedroom held precisely five things: a bed, a looking-glass, a washstand, a small dressing-table and a chair.

Hilda took off her wet hat, shook it and hung it on a peg on the door. Her coat and skirt followed. Her muddy shoes were flung into a corner. Active as a fencer in her close knickerbockers, she spread her tablecloth and made her tea. Two eggs nestling in a paper bag were transferred to a saucepan. A loaf of bread, an unshapely lump of butter with crumbs sticking in it and a very stale morsel of cake (a cake lasts so long when one eats it alone) were placed upon the table. A cup and saucer, two plates, a jug with a little milk in it, salt, another plate for the teapot.

Then while the kettle was singing she tore off her blouse and put on a loose house-dress. She hesitated, but did not tidy her hair. She had made enough concessions to civilization for one evening. Opening a volume of Strindberg, she read it steadily while she ate her tea. Sometimes she gave a little snort that she told herself was amusement, but was really indignation.

Hilda had been settled in her new life for seven weeks. The loneliness was still rather exciting, but it had its drawbacks. There was a terrible want of happenings about the days. She needed the occasional help of a word: "Do this," or "Hurry

up and finish that." She felt herself ready to slip into unenjoyable idleness.

At first she had shirked her metal-work in the mock industry of housework, that narcotic of active brains, but two rooms even by her inexperience could be kept clean in an hour or so. She so needed orders. There was not much fun in making things for people who could only praise without appreciating like her Ulster friends, and the small thing needed for a cousin's wedding present was soon done. She missed the business that Tony Hamel's interest was to have given her. He had promised introductions and work for her on his own account, but she had received neither and could not ask for them. The quarrel that her mind had had with Tony gave her a sense of isolation from her London friends. Time passed with desperate swiftness while she was doing nothing. To make one's bed, to shop and bring home one's parcels, to get a look at the Limoges enamels by daylight, to read the week's papers and the last Conrad, to "do" a gallery and to "get in" a little fresh air—and the week was over. She used to go to Kensington Gardens sometimes on her way from the Museum, and eat her lunch under the deserted trees. She loved to watch the dainty little fuchsias of children bowling their hoops. She had a shame-faced adoration for clean babies, they were so much pleasanter to look at, spite of all fine theorizing, than the screaming brats that hop-scotched and tip-catted about her in Soho. She longed to clean the dirty ones, and she sometimes gave them sweets, but she could not pretend to love them.

"Poverty must make people odious," she justified herself, "if it didn't, there would be no reason for getting rid of it."

Kensington was too far for more than an occasional pilgrimage, and if she was to get a share of exercise at all she must walk in the streets. For the most part she crossed Oxford Street and down the Charing Cross Road to the book-shops. "This season's hats" and satin *brochés* did not interest her. She passed as quickly as she could the furniture shops with their mahogany that seemed to have been dipped in treacle and their "Chippendale" sideboards standing as if on corns, but by the book-counters she lingered, feeling at one with all the quiet tweed-clad beings passing the hours with an opiate of unwanted volumes, bent of head, absorbed. Hilda would sometimes lift a volume and simulate an equal absorption; but she was conscious all the while of the people near her, she could not, as these others seemed to do, open a door with an opening book, and enter a distant place. However, she found some to be coveted "remainders," books of modern essays and George Moore's *Untilled Field*, and in a threepenny poetry box Ardent Keath's *Lute of Chrysoprase*, which caused her gloating ecstasies of amusement.

One day, while she was looking over some Beardsley and Bakst prints in a shop window, she became conscious of someone standing near her, a person who differed in some way from the men who usually stood beside her. His presence was so definite that she had a confused notion that he must be someone she knew, so she turned a little

and raised her eyes disconcertingly to find herself looking into the yellow-rimmed eyes of a huge, pock-marked man with a forked beard, who had evidently been expecting that very encounter. Feeling confused and flurried, Hilda turned away, disengaged herself from the row of readers and started for home. It was with difficulty that she did not run. Her instinct was for flight. Realization of this came upon her, and with customary self-control she lessened her pace, another moment and she was calling herself a fool. That meeting of the eyes must have been as accidental on his part as it was on hers. To confirm her folly she looked over her shoulder. The huge man was strolling in her wake. Again she was plunged in terror. She felt in her pocket for her latchkey and gripped it with her fingers. Through the forest she fled screaming (outwardly she walked across Oxford Street), and across Oxford Street strolled his Satanic majesty. Down Tottenham Court Road they went and to the left past the "Tour Eiffel" ("confirming," as Hilda thought afterwards, "his worst suspicions"). In sight of her own door her control failed her, and she made an undignified bolt for the steps; but at the threshold she paused, he was not the sort of person one liked to know one's address, and stood panting and tremulous, waiting for him. He smiled most affably, showing red lips and sharp white teeth.

"How dare you follow me?" whispered Hilda in a blaze.

He took his pointed boot from the lowest step and moved back on to the pavement.

"Pardon, Mees," he said, raising his hat.

"If you come round here again," snarled Hilda, "I'll tell the police."

Mr. Satan went away with himself. Hilda let herself in and slammed the door. She sat down on the stairs for a moment and laughed weakly at herself.

"Get thee anywhere, but behind me, Satan," she murmured.

She did not go out again that day.

However, she found the lesson useful. She never sought refuge in flight again. Instead she met the advances of strange men with a stare and a distinct: "Were you speaking to me?" that made her feel quite sorry for them, they looked so sheepish. "I suppose," she thought, "the lifting of the hat is the tribute vice pays to virtue. Why should any dreary little clerk with a moustache imagine I want to hug him? One would hardly touch those people to rescue them from drowning!"

She was very seldom accosted. There was nothing in her quick walk that resembled the protuberant glide of the streets, "Only a duffer could mistake me," she thought. "Danger! there's no danger in the street, except poverty. If that were done away with there'd be precious little need for rescue work. Who would go with a shop-walker to the Oxford if she could afford to do anything pleasanter? Immorality! It's simple dullness!"

The thought of Nelly came back often and always hurt her. She longed for knowledge that all had not gone as badly as she feared. She scanned the picture postcards and the "movies" for her

face. It would be the blessedest relief to know that she was a successful actress or married to a lord.

It would lift all the weight of guilt from her conscience. But no eager scrutiny found Nelly anywhere among swathed furs and feathers. Once only did Hilda see her semblance, and that was in the Euston Road. She saw a slim figure coming towards her, a figure in a long woollen coat, bright-haired like Nelly, and with a big felt hat bent bonnet-wise about her head and held in place with a veil. For one joyous moment Hilda prepared to hail her, to fling arms about her and bury a repentant face upon her neck, but as the girl came close she perceived that she had been mistaken. This girl was not Nelly. She was unutterably hideous. She looked as if some brutal hand had set upon her soft prettiness and wiped it out. The grey eyes under the dark brows blazed with agonized defiance. From brow to chin there was nothing but a pinch of flesh. She had no nose.

“It’s not that,” Hilda told herself, with shaking lips, “it will never be that; but I’d like her to know I was sorry for interfering, though it wouldn’t be any consolation to her if she did, dear God !”

A chastened Hilda, but by no means a reformed one. That meeting kept her shuddering all night.

It was with an ecstatic rush of excitement, excitement closely similar to that with which a shipwrecked mariner sights a sail, that she ran into, as the saying is, Miss Fitch one afternoon outside Mudie’s in New Oxford Street. Miss Fitch’s

greeting, though less thrilled with intensity and hampered by a bundle of books under one of her elbows, was satisfactorily warm.

"Why, my dear child," she exclaimed; "what has become of you all this time?"

She slipped an arm through Hilda's, and they turned towards Tottenham Court Road together.

"Come and see my digs," said Hilda, "and have tea."

It was very pleasant to have a companion again. Hilda squeezed the thin wrist against her ribs.

"I am glad I met you. These last months, I am just realizing it, have been like solitary confinement. I haven't spoken to a soul, do you know, except in shops, since I settled down in London."

She dragged Miss Fitch into De Bry's for some cakes, and then they set out homewards, Miss Fitch explaining as they went that she had hidden herself all the winter to finish her book on Fanny Burney.

"Yes, I'm taking to biography in my old age—Purple Paramours and that sort of thing—but I think you'll like Fanny, and I've got some tremendously good new chair covers to help me with the atmosphere."

They picked their way across Fitzroy Street, and: "This is the house," said Hilda proudly, stabbing in her key.

"What in the world, my darling girl, made you come to live here?" asked Miss Fitch.

"Isn't it the right place to live?" asked Hilda.

"Isn't it a rather—well—dangerous neighbourhood?" asked Miss Fitch.

"Oh, nonsense," cried Hilda, "it's as safe as the bank."

She felt annoyed with the Italian gentleman of the first floor for choosing this moment for thrusting out a curious, mustachioed head, to survey with astonishment Miss Fitch's elegant blue serge and feathered hat.

"Here we are," said Hilda, opening the studio door. "Tell me it's nice."

It was undeniably nice.

"Delightful," said Miss Fitch, "and so aloof. What a courageous person you are, Hilda."

"Indeed I'm not," said Hilda, glowing with pride, "it's a very tame existence, I assure you." She lit the fire and put on the kettle. Tea-cups were soon rattling on to the table. Miss Fitch watched her. Presently she said, "This is rather different from our last meeting. Do you remember it?"

Both of them became acutely conscious of their last troubled morning together. The details flashed in painful brightness through Hilda's mind. She felt her ears growing red as she bent above the kettle.

"You know we were all completely mistaken about that affair. Tony went unaccompanied."

"I know," said Hilda, "I wish he hadn't."

"How typical of you to wish that in the end! But things are much better as they are. And one bit of news you'll be glad to hear. Steven Young's becoming quite famous. He's had a long poem in the *Century Magazine*; and the *Atlantic Monthly* has taken ten short stories of his. His American

connection is a sure thing. It was a lucky inspiration of Tony's to take him to America."

"Luck," thought Hilda, "what a rum accident." Aloud she said, "That's splendid. Have you seen him?"

"Yesterday," said Miss Fitch. "He's only just back. And Anthony too. We've had our first reunion down at Otterbridge. Really the house is nicer than ever. How glad I am I met you to-day, dear child, it just completes things."

"And if she hadn't met me," thought Hilda, "I should just have disappeared from their view as completely as Nelly has."

"They were talking about you," said Miss Fitch, "and praising your work tremendously. And that's something interesting, by the way—Pandolefsky has been given his *congé*. He got one of the housemaids into a scrape."

"I want to laugh," said Hilda; "who sacked him?"

"Well, Erica, I suppose, was the moving spirit," said Miss Fitch. "It is rather funny, I agree, but you'll have to stop seeing jokes like that if you are coming back to The Height. No one cares for too elaborate a memory. But don't you see, my child, the plan I have made for you now that Pandolefsky is gone?"

Hilda shook her head.

"Oh, well. I won't say anything about it, but you'll see." She nodded a satisfied head. "Now that Erica will know you are alone she'll ask you down again, and you'll come, won't you?"

Hilda poured hot water into the tea-pot before

replying. She would have liked to be able to shake the dust of all these worthless ones from her feet, but they were too attractive. In less than a minute she had decided to be one of them. What was the good of crying over spilt milk? Society heals over its painful memories as healthy flesh heals over a wound. Wasn't it a beggarly sort of thing to keep a wound open?

"I suspect I'll come if I'm asked," she said soberly.

Then she asked for the others. Ardent Keath, the Ecksteins, Mrs. Arden. They were all just as usual. Mrs. Arden had been having cooks and housemaids all the winter, and now she was having a baby. Miss Fitch could not imagine where people found monotony in domestic life. As far as she could see it was horror upon horror's heels, a gutter blocked or something wrong with the fuse-box. Infinite variety. Mrs. Arden, said Miss Fitch, would be delighted to see Hilda. So would they all. Might she have another cup of tea, and what delicious cakes Hilda had bought for her, she'd no notion such delights were to be found in Bloomsbury.

All the while Hilda kept thinking with a fury of revolt. She remembered the adulation these people had showered upon Nelly less than a year ago. It was only to please Anthony, after all. It had been his praise they were praising, his love they were loving, him they were flattering, as if Nelly had been the work of his hands. How would they have behaved if he and Nelly had gone away together, as they would have done but for her own

besotted interference, if the girl had been installed mistress, perhaps, of a second "Height"? There would have been much talk of "charity" then, of "preferring not to judge," of "sins of the flesh being no sins." Mockeries and upbraiding raced through her head. Miss Fitch was saying: "We were so afraid that you were dropping us altogether. We hated the thought of your seeing too much of the wrong kind of people. We thought you and that girl were probably still in partnership."

"I wish we were," said Hilda; "I shouldn't feel so despicably mean then. I don't even know where she is."

"Hilda, you're a great goose. Don't you see that that's providential?"

"I feel there is blood on my head," said Hilda, smiling sadly.

"Well, it isn't my blood, anyway," said Miss Fitch, "and I'm not going to be lugubrious. Suppose you'd had your way and Erica had divorced him, whose blood would you have been suffering from then?"

"Not Mrs. Hamel's," said Hilda, "because she hasn't any."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Miss Fitch. "And if you are so oppressed by bad works let me tell you of a good one. Erica is much improved by the little shaking you gave her. She was livelier than I've known her yesterday night. Evidently it was a case of the child who wants slapping. You supplied the remedy."

"Oh, well," said Hilda.

"Oh, well?" said Miss Fitch.

"I suppose in time I'll stop feeling ashamed of myself."

Miss Fitch embraced her affectionately as they parted.

Next day brought Steven Young hot-foot to repay his debt to her and to recount his adventures. It was a saga of triumph. He had forgotten the contributive cause of his good fortune.

"You know, Hamel is a great man," he assured her. "You've no notion how splendid he seemed when he was alone like that."

Hilda's mouth curved disparagingly.

"You needn't have a knife into him, Hilda. He's most tremendously sad under all the liveliness and good humour."

"Did he say anything about Nelly?"

"He said very little about her. He loves her as he loves all the charming and tender things in this world. Hilda, I shall be mad with you if you sneer."

Steven could see in his mind's eye Hamel sitting beside him on the deck with hat on knee and wind lifting his thick hair. "Of course I loved her. She was made to be loved. I can't blame myself for that. But I'm too old and too tame or, I begin to think, too effete for a romantic adventure. Civilization puts a kind of moral impotence into all of us. We desire a thing, we stretch out our hands for it, but when it's in our grasp we don't know what to do with it. We need a static pursuit, a kind of Grecian Urn love that never knows fulfilment. It's not fear or self-control that stays us, but self-criticism, an onlooking from which we

cannot escape. It's more disconcerting than the eye of God. It takes a man of strong character nowadays to be a rake. Not that I was that even at my basest. Twenty years ago I might have been different, less scrupulous or less self-centred, certainly happier. As it is I fled not from temptation but from the cessation of it. Perhaps I have not done much harm. I taught her the sweetest part of love for a while, anyway. She might have had a worse teacher."

He put back his handsome head to feel the wind on his throat, and sunlight made sharply visible some little white hairs among the bronze of his temples.

"He's so kind. He's full of gentleness. He might have behaved so infinitely worse. I don't think there's much use in judging people."

Hilda could have shaken Steven; but after all he had come quickly to see her, and why should she want him to quarrel with his friend? Miss Fitch was quite right. One did not want too elaborate a memory.

She heard about the American summer, the bathing and boating, the camping in the mountains. The villa Tony had seen completed for the Coonmanrigs. She took Nelly's purse after he had gone and put it away in a drawer—to remind her from time to time and at long intervals how expert she had grown at forgetting. But it had a surprising moment of usefulness first.

A few days later came the letter that Miss Fitch had prophesied, and with it the suggestion that the Hamels would like to have Hilda to fill the post left

vacant by Pandolefsky. This was glory and an awakening of the world indeed. With headlong rapture she accepted the position and prepared to return to The Height the very next week-end. She fled across to Miss Fitch to impart the good news, and they arranged to travel down together.

Now there was nothing but the land of milk and honey before her. No more lonely walks, no more fears, no more aimlessness. Taking her last look at the muddy March streets, her glances stroked the houses with affection, the foggy evening blue, the little doves' wings of shadows on Catesby's chimney-pots. She was so very glad to be leaving them behind.

Shop windows were beginning to show an occasional light, home-going workers to crowd the pavements. She walked along blissfully presaging what marvels of dexterity her hands were about to prove themselves, what contentment was going to be hers. She passed the Tube Station in Cranbourne Street, busy with imagined hammerings and firings, grindings and gildings. In this mood her eyes fell on some jewellery in a pawn-shop window—pinchbeck emeralds, agate-topped snuff-boxes, Sheffield pepper-pots, cut glass decanters, purple glasses, a frayed fire-screen, spoons of Dutch silver, square rims of brooches pearl-set, miniature of a lady in a yellow turban, a pewter ladle, a china group that was never in Chelsea, a torn lace ruffle, a tray of ear-rings, watches, buckles, rings. Hilda's eyes fastened upon one among them.

“Surely I know enough about my trade by this time to know that that's good,” she thought. She

pushed open the door and entered the shop. In there it was almost dark. The light filtered in beams through the miscellany of the window shelves. An old man with wrinkled hands was reading the afternoon's paper. He raised moist eyes and looked at her above his spectacles.

"I wanted to look at a ring that I see in the window," said Hilda.

The old man rose with a grudging air as if he resented her interruption, and lifted out the tray shakily.

"That's the one," said Hilda, "what do you want for this?"

"Two pound ten," said the old man, looking hard at her, "it's gold."

Hilda looked in her purse mechanically, for she knew she had not so much with her, and (provoking) the banks were by this time shut. She must have the ring. That she had set her soul on. She thought of Nelly's purse lying useless in her flat. That was the thing! For one night she would borrow.

"Very well," she told the old man, "put the ring aside for me. I'll call back for it."

She disguised her eagerness a little—after all she was born in a commercial city.

She was back in half an hour, breathless and rejoicing.

"Two pounds ten, you said? Right." The ring was handed across the counter. "It's frightfully cheap," said Hilda.

"I'm glad you think so," said the old man sarcastically. Seen close to it was even more

wonderful than she had supposed. A little wood spirit with a lamp! It was entrancing.

"I say, I suppose you don't know where this came from?" she asked.

"We don't ask questions," said the old man, presenting a blighting indifference to her enthusiasm. "But it's not old, if you want to know." He thought that would disappoint her. He revenged himself for her "cheap."

"I should think not, indeed."

She hastened into the street again. Her new possession was a triumph. If that was modern work there must be a man somewhere doing as good stuff as Tony Hamel. How excited he'd be when he saw it. What fun if they found out who it was, and the man was as wonderful as his work. He must be a man of genius anyhow. Perhaps they might help him to fame and fortune. Perhaps he was handsome. Her pleasant fancies increased as she journeyed homeward.

Miss Fitch was sitting composedly with her toes on a foot-warmer when Hilda burst into the train at Waterloo.

"Janet, I've made such a find! It's simply too wonderful. An unknown genius. I'm suffocating with enthusiasm. Just look here."

She flung her bag on to the seat, stripped off her glove and displayed her treasure.

"There! What do you think of that? And on top of all the other good fortune. Am not I a lucky beast?"

Miss Fitch was properly impressed with the ring. It certainly was marvellous.

"Oh got ye this by sea or land?  
Or got ye it off a dead man's hand?"

she quoted. "You must show it to Anthony Hamel."

"I shall indeed. You'll see how keen he'll be. The man who made this was a master. The Boss couldn't do better himself."

How pleasant it was to smell the country air. To be speeding along sandy roads with rain-water brightening the ruts and wagtails scuttling into the hedges. The Height was just the same as Hilda had left it. Only some of the walls and floors were different. The music-room had gone to the Fannan-Wakes, and the Hanburys had got the dining-room. New lamps for old, perhaps, but the oil was the same. There was the same babble of talk in the white and blue drawing-room, the same group round the fire awaiting dinner. Mrs. Hamel, smiling more than formerly, in pale scarlet, Mrs. Arden, looking peaceful in grey. Ardent Keath, with a new volume of poetry by a naturalized Syrian from Antioch, entitled *The Bull Roarer*, which was, he said, as if the manure of the fields found speech.

How amusing it was to be welcomed there, to be part of the old instead of part of the new (which consisted of two tall Americans with wonderfully underpinned front teeth, Anthony's latest market), to see Steven Young in a Bond Street evening suit, to hear Miss Fitch laughing as usual. Nothing was altered. The siren singer had disappeared and the waters had closed over her. Presently came Anthony, magnificent as ever, more magnificent

even by contrast with her evil thoughts of him. How thrilling to have clasped his hand, to be patted on the shoulder! There he was glowing with paternal kindness! Of course, she worshipped him, the greeting was scarcely over when she drew off the ring and put it eagerly into his fingers.

“Look what I found in a pawn-shop, Boss. What do you think of it?”

The ring lay upon Anthony's hand. The little golden Nelly in the greenwood holding up the lamp of truth, but the lamp, the diamond, had fallen out. He looked at it without speaking for several minutes. The group round the fire waited too, politely considerate of his opinion.

For a moment Anthony was unaware of them.

He saw again the yellow hair, felt the soft touch of lips coaxing at the corner of his mouth. All the summer of tenderness and doubt and stolen meetings pressed in a suffocating flood upon him. A passion of regret surged up as he looked into Hilda's waiting eyes.

What were they waiting for? Was it a trap that she had set him? The candour of the gaze denied a hidden thought. Oh, yes—the ring.

“It's very charming,” he said dully.

He saw again a skirt stained at the hem with dust, a broken shoe with a dirty great-toe showing through it.

“But, Boss, don't you think it very good? I thought I'd discovered a genius.”

“There's a stone missing,” he said absently. He appeared to be half asleep. They watched him a little curiously.

"Don't you like it, Mr. Hamel? I hoped you would think it so good," Hilda's voice roused him.

Anthony suddenly smiled down at her.

"The man who made it certainly had talent," he said, "but he bungled the setting. It didn't last."

Hilda was disappointed.

They went in to dinner.

## HARLEQUINADE

AT two o'clock on a November morning a young man in an opera hat was standing beside a lamp-post. He was not a handsome youth, being somewhat thick of body and full of lip, but his eyes were lively, his expression amiable, and there was a certain rosiness and roundness about him which, together with a curliness of hair which no rigour of the barber could subdue, gave him an air both innocent and attractive. As he stood he lightly tapped a foot and puckered his mouth in ghostly whistling with a sort of resigned impatience. His coat collar was turned up so that his muffler interjected a white corner between it and his left ear; his hands were deep in his pockets, where they clutched—one a book and the other a box of matches. He was aware of the dampness of the pavement through his evening shoes. He had smoked his last cigarette.

The sky above the houses was dull with rain. Beneath each lamp a yellow strip of reflection made the roadway deep as a canal. The houses seemed to have assumed a look of deliberate blankness and indifference. Shutters, lace curtains, plush curtains, white curtains, ground glass, glass in pink

and yellow squares, glass with two faded chrysanthemums in pots behind it, lifeless as so many coffins, baffling and ignoring him. Dark blinds, buff blinds, patterned blinds, Venetian blinds—solely for the purpose of his hoodwinking. The young man tapped his foot and whistled inaudibly. They might make him feel foolish, but they should not make him go away.

A policeman prowled down the street, flicking his light rhythmically into the areas. He observed the young man with a solemn impersonal scrutiny, opera hat, overcoat, patent shoes, all his right side, and then, more closely in passing, his back, shoes, overcoat, opera hat. The young man did not turn his head to see if his left side were scrutinized as thoroughly. The policeman's presence increased his feeling of foolishness until he almost wriggled in his embarrassment, but he succeeded in assuming an outward appearance of calm as blank, he hoped, and bafflingly indifferent as that of the houses themselves, implying, by a slightly contemptuous drooping of the eyelids, that his position at that hour in that place was as correctly usual as their own.

After all, their null air was also subterfuge. Behind the smooth walls of their hypocrisy men and women were at that moment sprawled in every attitude of sleep and nakedness. They were as full of fierceness and sloth and colour as his head was full of thoughts. Was not his brain, indeed, almost identical with number twenty-seven opposite? Did he not know what forms of furniture, what intricacy of ornament it held? In his memory did he not

grasp the entire orientation of the place as if it were a set scene with the bones of his own head for proscenium? Dismissing all expression from his face, conforming involuntarily to his surroundings, he began to live again in the picture his memory placed before him.

Only two hours ago he had been supping in the house opposite—less than two hours, for it was half-past twelve when he had left, when they had all left; an hour and a half since the Lady in Mauve and Miss America had smiled “Good-night” to him from the window of their limousine; since Henry Berners and George Richardson had slammed the door of their taxicab; since the swarthy face of their host had smiled that sensational dazzling smile of his from the bright grotto of his open door, followed by the swift seriousness of the shut door and the headlong blackness of the fanlight; an hour and a half since our young man had marched away round the corner with emphatic steps, to return much less emphatically (like a spy? No, not like a spy), like a good, kind, curly retriever dog, to take up his sentinel position beneath the lamp-post.

What had been happening, he wondered, since his host of the black eyebrows had switched off the hall light and rushed upstairs? He had been in the devil of a rage and the devil of a hurry. Was that a sound from behind the obfuscating windows? The young man sprang tense, his self-consciousness vanishing in the need for action; but his straining ears caught only the spurt of a taxicab crossing the Edgware Road away to his

left, and behind him he became aware that what had seemed until then utter silence was full of the shunting of trains in Paddington Station. The house opposite gave no encouragement, but there had been a sound distinctly, he could swear to it, of breaking glass. He resumed his thoughts.

The owner of No. 27 was a curious man, a blackness and whiteness in a neutral world. The Mauve Lady had said that he was the only man in London who still made vice attractive. "Not that he's really wicked, you know, but he's so clever, he pays such public compliments, he knows such a lot about clothes, and his smile is simply glamorous!" She enjoyed knowing him, she enjoyed his dinner-parties, "always something to eat you can't get elsewhere"; his theatre-parties, "always takes you to the thing you have to see and can't get tickets for"; his guests, "always the last new man or the next new man"—to-night they had been celebrating his discovery of the Leonardo, there was talk of a public banquet to him over that, they had dined at the Savoy and seen the "new thing" at the theatre; and then they had "trundled" back to sup at his own house and see some Chinese lacquer chairs he had "picked up" in Islington.

He had let them himself into his panelled hall.

"How I envy you this house! It would be a show place if sight seers had any real sense of the beautiful," from Lady Mauve as they mounted the circling stairs.

"Aren't you very lonely?" had asked Miss America, an elf in pink tulle.

"Lonely? But why?" from their host, with his black eyes upon her.

"It's such a big house. I should be afraid to live all by myself."

"Nonsense!" cried the Mauve Lady. "Who could dare to be anything but in transports all the time among such lovely things?"

So much in single file above him.

Their host makes them sit in the lacquered chairs, while he heats soup for them at the table. The big room is full of towering shadows. The branching silver candlesticks light up the table like an altar. It is a little island of brightness among the old Jamaica furnishings, dark walls and bronzes. Over the mantelpiece is a shell-like fifteenth-century Madonna in a painted frame, with a small flame wavering before her. The rays fall steeply from it on to the burnished head and drooping shoulders of Miss America, who has taken a seat beside the fender, and having learnt that some little pieces of black stuff she has found on the mantelpiece are incense, she is amusing herself with "josses," as she calls them, sending the grey spirals of sweet smoke to mingle with her companions' cigarettes.

"I've lit three josses," she informs the room: "one for the Madonna, and one for Mr. Buddha in the corner, and one for you," she tells their host, "because you're looking so like Mephistopheles."

Their host assures them that he is very like Mephistopheles--very like Mephistopheles stirring

soup in a saucepan. The likeness had always been remarkable.

Fizz! A drop of soup goes into the spirit-lamp, and Miss America starts so that she rattles the fire-irons.

Lady Mauve says it is time she was in bed; but they have no intention of going away yet awhile.

The soup is ready and they sit down to table, Madame Mauve on their host's right, Miss America on his left next to George Richardson, and behind her is the archway into the adjoining room, hung with a Jacobean embroidery, concealing and revealing an impenetrable blackness. She glances towards it with only half-simulated apprehension. Her joke about Mephistopheles has affected her nerves.

What have they all talked about, making so lively a clatter? Their host is carving a game pie. Henry Berners is looking after the drinks. Lady Mauve discourses on chaperons and their right to drink Bénédictine, which she concedes herself: "Girls have to be amused nowadays. They won't put up with years of certain boredom for the sake of a problematical husband." "And years of certain boredom," adds somebody, who is not the curly-headed young man. How they talk and laugh, and how the champagne sparkles in the big faceted goblets! The table-spoon goes with a suck into the trifle. George Richardson is eating a jam tart "with his fingers."

"What's that?" exclaims Miss America suddenly. She cannot forget the cavern at her back. "I'm sure I heard something."

Bats, they suggest to her, in these old houses, or a white owl, or the grey lady, or Saint Gengulphus with his head under his arm. But Miss America persists that she did hear something: a sort of rustling.

"There!" They all hear it now: a quiet step upon the floor. All eyes are intent on the dark square and the embroidery. "What fun if I've caught you a burglar!" says Miss America. Then a white hand takes hold of the edge of the curtain, a white hand and a white arm, and draws it deliberately aside.

George Richardson and Henry Berners and the curly-headed young man rise slowly to their feet and stand staring, for in the archway is a glorious young woman posed as if for tableaux, much amused at the sensation she is making, enjoying the eyes that are upon her. She stands there motionless long enough for them to observe in detail the splendour of her hair and the whiteness of her skin and the starry brightness of the candle-flames reflected in her eyes. Her gown below her white bosom is deep pink; a grey fur coat hangs from her shoulders.

"How very nice of you all to come!" says the newcomer at last, stepping over the threshold. "I do like to have a birthday party."

She strolled across to a couch under the window and very unconcernedly sat down upon it, thrust a hand beneath it and brought forth a pair of gilt shoes with preposterous heels, and, still talking, proceeded to put them on. This she did by thrusting the toe of one walking-shoe into the heel of

the other and gouging her feet out of them without untying the laces.

"It's a vile night. Not a taxi to be had. I've been prancing about in mud up to my knees." With a backward kick she sent the muddy shoes under the sofa and rose to her feet. "That's better. Now I am ready to say how d'you do. I won't take off my coat, thanks; I'm probably not fastened down the back. I'll have a little trifle, and you might pass me one of those carnations for my hair."

Henry Berners chooses her a carnation, and George Richardson holds his watch open for her while she fastens the pink rosette into the yellow pyramid.

"Talk," says the Lady in Mauve in an agonized whisper. They all rush into the gap at once, offering her pie and grapes and salad and raspberry tarts. "Champagne!" cries the lovely stranger. "Give me two glasses of champagne and I'll sing to you." Henry Berners pours out the wine. The forks begin to clink again, the conversation becomes again noisy and entangled. There was something infectious in the newcomer's laughter that put cheerfulness into them anew. The curly-headed young man laughed with her and adored her: her beauty was a lamp in the room. His eyes were filled with the piled glitter of her hair, the long, pink mouth, the eyes that bewildered his above the wine-glass; he forgot the Mauve Lady and Miss America and the place and the hour and everything except the young woman on the other side of the table.

Henry Berners it was who jarred him from this amorous trance by a smart kick on the ankle and reminded him of reality; of reality, alas! with its common and over-repeated expression, a scowl. A deadly scowl it was, too, and their host at the end of the table was wearing it. Seeing him thus in the midst of the rosy glow the young man felt as if he had looked through a trap-door on to icy water. He became in his turn watchful, and leant back in his chair gazing on the black eyes that were fixed in such a blighting steadiness on the seemingly unconscious bright ones at the other end of the tables. What was the bright ones' intention? Less to charm, the young man fancied, than to make mad. Their owner had consented to sing.

"Signorita la belle maman," came the childish soprano, so young a voice out of the gold and scarlet, while she offered Miss America an imaginary bouquet; and then "Wiede, wiede, wenne," and at "Heisst mein Ganz" her fingers just for the briefest of seconds tickled George Richardson under the chin. Then sitting on the arm of the chair, reckless of its venerable Sheraton, she struck up the marching song that never loses its freshness of brutality: "'Twas on the road to sweet Athy: Hurroo! hurroo!" Following this she had another glass of champagne, and was now prepared, she assured them, to give an imitation of Madame Marcelle Irvon of the Folies Bergères, Paris.

At this point the Mauve Lady found it imperative to drag herself and the equally reluctant Miss America away. She would have done so before, but the situation had so numbed her wits that she

really had not the words on which to make an exit; and from a *fête galante* of that kind one really had to make an exit. It was not a case for a simple getting away; it required extrication. She managed it when the inspiration came in what appeared to the young man a masterly manner.

"We mustn't stay another minute. We should have gone long ago; but once this delightful treat began—— I'd no idea—" she pressed the hand of her grim host—"you had such a surprise in store for us. It's been too perfect. Good-night." She beamed round upon everybody. She felt she had risen to the occasion.

"Good-bye," said Miss America quite simply, too enthralled with the adventure to bear ill-will to her extinguisher. "So pleased to have met you!"

What a convenient language, American! She would have said just the same thing to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Henry Berners opened the door for them and they passed out. Their host did not immediately follow. There was a brief duel of eyes between him and George Richardson, and then they were all saying good-bye to the mysterious beauty (except the curly-headed young man, who, to his disgust, was dumb); and "Well, old man, it isn't *our funeral*," Henry Berners could be heard *sotto voce* to the reluctant George Richardson on the stairs. And there at the end of everything was the midnight street, and the lamps, and the smell of rain, and the sound of the closing door of the Mauve Lady's motor, the last flicker of "Good-night," "So long, old chap," quenched in the

oncoming, laughter-scattering silence, the splash of the muddy pavement as they turned away, the shutting of the front door, George Richardson cursing the weather, Henry Berners, ever practical, hailing the taxicab with his umbrella, more "good-nights," and our young friend disconsolate beneath the lamp-post.

So his mind reconstructed it.

A clock sent the notes of the half-hour drifting into the sodden darkness. Out of the curtained windows behind him came a single "ting" from a dining-room mantelpiece. It hardly seemed worth while to wait any longer. Beauty and Beast were both happily asleep by this time. Hadn't he made a pretty complete fool of himself? And here was the policeman again, confound him! Why couldn't he go to bed like other people at a decent hour, instead of prying and prowling through the streets? He was advancing inexorable as fate. The young man braced himself to meet another scrutiny. "What about half-a-crown?" he asked himself. He knew how the whole tenor of a life may hang upon such a trifle. Suppose he were arrested for loitering, what sort of figure would he cut in the dock next morning? He could see the little paragraph—

"Magistrate: 'How many glasses of champagne does he say he had?' 'Two, your worship.' Magistrate: 'Two too many' (laughter).' They thought themselves mighty funny at Marylebone. What would his father think about it? Would he laugh, too, or would it be: 'Damn you, you young puppy! I make you an allowance to live

decently——” Should he give the policeman the half-crown? Wouldn’t that look too suspiciously like bribery? Well, what on earth else was it? But surely in a free country a man might stand outside a friend’s house without having to pay for the privilege? Why should he care what a policeman thought? His conscience was clear. If the man interfered with him he was an ignorant brute; if he could be bought off he was a scoundrel. The young man squared his shoulders. The light of the lantern was flitted over him. “Good-night, sir,” said the policeman. He was, after all, a thoroughly worthy and respectable man; a simple, kindly—and, moreover, he was twice the age, at least, of the young hero. “Good-night, constable. Beastly weather.” The slow tramp went up the street and turned the corner. Fortified by the rites of the law the young man continued to watch No. 27. By God! he’d stay there till the milk came.

Almost at once he was rewarded for his constancy. There was a sound from the house opposite that resembled nothing so much as a composite fall downstairs, the door was shaken with a heavy blow from the inside, opened an inch, banged to, opened again, held open, the toe of a patent leather shoe thrust between it and the door-post. “I won’t, I won’t!” the young man heard a feminine voice saying and a sound of hard breathing through noses. Crash! The door swung back to the wall so that its bolts and chains clattered. Crash! Someone in grey was bundled out on to the step. Bang! from the knocker as the door swung to again.

"No, you don't," says the grey somebody, throwing herself against the door. "Get out," says the voice inside. The young woman wastes no breath in words; she is pushing. "Get your foot in," the young man silently conjures her; he is jiggling with excitement. The door is closing; the young woman reverses her position and leans all her weight backwards against it. Useless: with a sharp click the latch has caught, the bolts shoot home in aggressive triumph.

"Dirty swine!" screams the young woman, whisking round and putting her mouth to the letter-box.

The young man crossed the road and waited, hat in hand, for her attention. With her fair hair unrolled down her back she looked like a Fatima in train for execution. She had told Bluebeard inside to cut his throat with the carving-knife, and was suggesting mutilations, when she became aware of the young man standing near her. Instantly her manner changed: she stood upright, smiled a deprecating, disarming smile, and said in a mincing voice, "Forgotten my latch-key. Too bad. Can't make anybody hear."

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" asked the young man, still uncovered.

"Thank you very much. I really don't know what's to be done. It's such an unusual position for a lady to find herself in. Why—" she began to smile as she looked into the young man's face—"you're trying to kid me. I've seen you before to-night. You were at the party, weren't you?"

"I was indeed."

The young woman shook back her hair and laughed.

"I gave them fits," she said. Having finished laughing, she looked at him once more suspiciously. "What did you come back for?"

He was a trifle confused. "I thought things might be difficult for you. I've been waiting in case you needed help."

She laughed delightedly, catching her lower lip with her teeth. "Bless him! he's a dear boy. He thought he could help me."

"If I could—"

"Of course you can. Here, hold these a minute while I do my hair."

This was not quite the sort of assistance the young man had looked forward to giving, but he made obediently a cup of his hands and received an assortment of combs and pins that she pulled out of the mane upon her shoulders, and among them a red carnation.

"I believe it was you gave me that," she said, beginning to weave the golden mass with uplifted hands. It was Henry Berners, as they both knew, but the young man had courage to say—

"I wish you'd give it me back."

She stabbed the final hairpins into her hair, took the carnation, kissed it, gave it to him again.

"There," she said; "there's something to cry over when you're sixty—if you haven't lost it."

The young man put it into his breast pocket and took timid possession of the hand that had given it.

"I say, you know, what are you going to do?"

"Do? Why, I haven't begun to think about it.

Did I look nice in there?" She nodded at the door behind them.

"You were glorious. But what did you do it for?"

She began her laugh again. "Just devilment; sheer, unnecessary devilment. It doesn't do to let a man get too sure of one. One must make surprises. One mustn't let him get to think he's *got* one. No-ho! that would never do."

"You made him pretty mad."

"I meant to. He's made me pretty mad once or twice, I can tell you. I was feeling larky: I had to have my bit of fun. And besides, if there's going to be a change, I've got to be seen, you know."

The fine rain in the lamplight made a white radiance about her.

"Don't you worry, childie; I shall be all right."

"But what are you going to do now?"

She drew her brows together for a second.

"Tell me—" the words sprang at him—"do I smell of drink?"

The young man was so taken aback that he nearly fell down the steps. She gripped his hand and steadied him.

"Of course you don't."

"Of course I do, you mean."

"A very little, perhaps," said the young man, blushing.

"Ah, that's better," said the young woman. "Would you say, now, I was drunk?"

"Certainly you're not." He was indignant. "I swear you're not,"

"Would you say that if you were the police-doctor up at the barracks?"

"I should, most certainly."

She smiled at his fervour.

"I suppose you're all right yourself. Used to champagne? I mean, I can take your word for it?"

The young man laughed. "I've had horrid doubts; but I'm sober all right. I swear I am."

"Very well," said the girl, "we'll take that as settled. I shall stay here all night and create a scandal. That'll annoy somebody."

"But you can't stay here in the rain!"

"Why not? My complexion will stand it, so far."

"But you'll catch cold."

"The boy is talking nonsense."

"But your coat will be spoiled."

"I'll buy a new one."

Her smile was imperturbable. He had a curious feeling that he had shrunk to pigmy size and was walking into her eyes beneath the starry lashes.

"Look here," he said, "at least you might sit down. Sit on this book."

He pulled out of his pocket a volume that he had been reading, *The Philosophy of Change*, and put it on the step. She sat down without glancing at it.

"I've chained myself to the scraper," she said, yawning; "call me at eight."

He realized that she was tired enough almost to fall asleep. Her tiredness made her look, not old, but very young. The rain was hanging like a dew

upon the fur of her coat and the locks of her hair. Her delicate face was framed in a mist of little curls. Bending down, he told her so.

"Go on," she said, "tell me some more. I like to hear you."

"If you were on my doorstep," he said, "I shouldn't keep the door shut."

"If you'd take my advice, darling, you wouldn't mix yourself up with persons like me."

"I can't tell you what a happiness it is even to look at you. I wish you would trust me to take care of you."

"Ah, but there's your own good to think about."

(Was there a hint of slyness in that suggestion?)

"I am thinking of that all the time, I'm ashamed to say. Dearest, won't you come?"

"You're a complete darling," said the girl; but she made no attempt to move.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch: the steady tramp of the policeman again.

"It is the lark, and not the nightingale," murmured the girl, rising to her feet.

The lantern was turned upon them.

"Oh, constable," said the girl, with the mincing quality of voice, "it's so provoking: I've come out without my latch-key. Could you make somebody hear?"

The policeman looked from one to the other, but came at once under the spell of beauty in distress.

"I'll have a try, Miss," he said. "Have you knocked, Miss?"

"Once or twice," said the voice, very small.

The policeman put down his lantern.

"I'll try the area bell, Miss."

Diapasons pealed. He did it again.

"Do the servants sleep in the basement?"

"No, they sleep at the top of the house."

"Ho! Then I'll try the knocker."

Thunders reverberated.

"You'll have to keep on and on, I expect," said the girl sweetly.

The policeman went at it.

"Try the electric bell," she presently suggested. "We can't help it if we wake the street. I'll ring, while you keep on at the knocker."

They made an astounding amount of noise between them.

"Try a shout through the letter-box."

"Hulloa!" bawled the policeman. "Hulloa in there!"

The young man felt it was time to be going. At any moment the door might open and reveal his share in the conspiracy. His help was no longer needed. He could trust the policeman to put the case to No. 27's infuriated owner. He separated himself from the pair on the doorstep and began to move away.

"Have another go at the knocker," the girl was saying, with evident enjoyment. "I simply must get in." The young man was forgotten.

Well, he had helped her do her hair, anyhow. He walked away in the shadow of the houses. The policeman was now hammering like an impatient school audience: Thump—thump—thump thump thump— Thump—thump—thump thump thump.

Glancing over his shoulder, the young man saw the girl in an attitude of graceful nonchalance, hand on hip, gilt shoes crossed, head tilted, leaning all her weight on one thumb and that thumb on the stud of the electric bell. With that last glimpse he turned the corner.

THE END

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